



Religious Education and Moral Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Communities

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a crucial role in shaping moral consciousness and fostering social reconstruction, particularly in communities recovering from conflict. Within this broader field, the study of lived experiences in faith-based moral education remains underexplored, especially regarding how educators internalize and enact moral renewal in post-conflict societies. However, most existing approaches focus on institutional reforms and programmatic interventions, leaving limited understanding of the subjective moral experiences that drive genuine transformation. This study addresses that gap by applying an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how religious educators and community leaders experience and interpret moral reconstruction through their pedagogical and social engagement. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seventeen religious educators, faith-based community leaders, and facilitators actively involved in post-conflict educational and reconciliation initiatives, and analyzed following the IPA procedure of iterative reading, initial coding, emergent theme development, and cross-case thematic interpretation to uncover core experiential meanings. The findings reveal that moral reconstruction is grounded in spiritual empathy, reflective teaching, and faith-based empowerment, forming a dynamic process of moral accompaniment that bridges personal healing and collective restoration. These insights highlight that religious education functions not merely as doctrinal transmission but as a lived moral practice that rehumanizes individuals and strengthens community cohesion. The study thus enriches theoretical and practical understandings of post-conflict moral education by demonstrating how phenomenological inquiry can uncover the inner processes that sustain moral and social recovery. in communities transitioning from conflict toward social reconciliation and collective renewal.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious education has long played a vital role in shaping the moral and ethical foundations of human societies (Betawi & Nasution, 2024). Across diverse cultural contexts, it functions not merely as an instructional domain but as a transformative force that molds individual and collective consciousness. In regions affected by social conflict or moral disintegration, religious education assumes a particularly significant function, serving as a moral compass for communities seeking reconciliation, ethical renewal, and social healing.. Within these environments, education is not confined to the transmission of religious doctrine but extends to the cultivation of empathy, forgiveness, and social responsibility (Farohah, 2022). This moral and spiritual orientation situates religious education as both a pedagogical and a sociocultural phenomenon that bridges faith and human development.

The phenomenon of moral reconstruction through religious education is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences of educators and community members who face the challenges of rebuilding social trust. The aftermath of conflict often leaves communities fractured psychologically, ethically, and spiritually. Religious educators, positioned at the intersection of moral guidance and community empowerment, encounter these fractures directly in their teaching and outreach. Their role is therefore not limited to delivering religious instruction; it also involves guiding communities through processes

of reflection, reconciliation, and moral recovery. Such experiences reflect a dynamic interplay between faith, emotion, and social healing that cannot be fully captured through quantitative observation alone.

Understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond institutional frameworks toward the exploration of meaning as lived and interpreted by individuals (Efendi & Afrianto, 2024). A phenomenological approach provides a way to illuminate how religious educators and community leaders perceive and embody the moral dimensions of education in post-conflict contexts. This perspective focuses on the essence of human experience: how values, faith, and ethical consciousness are internalized and expressed through everyday actions. By examining the subjective realities of those who live the process of moral reconstruction, phenomenological inquiry contributes to a more profound understanding of religious education as a humanizing force that nurtures moral resilience and social cohesion.

In recent years, research on lived experiences within religious and moral education has gained increasing scholarly attention, reflecting a growing recognition that human experience lies at the core of understanding educational transformation (Wijaya et al., 2025). Scholars have explored how teachers, religious leaders, and community facilitators construct meaning from their engagement with faith-based pedagogy, especially in contexts marked by social tension or moral disruption. Such inquiries have illuminated how spiritual learning and moral reflection become embodied processes, shaped by the interplay of personal belief, social context, and collective memory (Matkhanova, 2023). This area of study, situated within the broader field of phenomenology, provides a unique lens for examining how individuals experience and interpret the act of moral reconstruction as a deeply subjective and contextual phenomenon.

However, significant methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and authenticity of these experiences (Kagin & Lybbert, 2023). Quantitative or survey-based studies often reduce complex inner realities into measurable variables, overlooking the nuanced emotions, reflections, and moral reasoning that characterize human experience. Even some qualitative studies, while rich in narrative data, have tended to rely on descriptive summaries that lack interpretative depth. As a result, the *how* and *why* of participants' meaning-making processes remain underexplored, limiting the scholarly understanding of religious education as a lived moral practice rather than a set of institutional mechanisms.

These methodological limitations highlight the necessity of an interpretative phenomenological approach, which enables the exploration of meaning as it is lived and reflected upon by individuals (Winarso et al., 2023). Unlike traditional empirical models that prioritize generalizability, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of experience to understand phenomena from the perspective of those who live them. In the context of moral reconstruction after conflict, this approach allows researchers to access the moral and emotional dimensions that underpin religious educators' engagement with their communities. Consequently, the phenomenological focus bridges the gap between abstract theorization and the lived moral reality of faith-driven education, providing insights into how meaning, empathy, and moral transformation unfold through direct human experience.

Although numerous initiatives and studies have addressed moral education and community reconstruction in post-conflict contexts, most have relied on practical and programmatic approaches such as curriculum reform, community dialogue facilitation, or leadership training to rebuild social cohesion (Assa'idi, 2021). While these strategies provide valuable structural interventions, they tend to emphasize what is being implemented rather than how individuals experience and internalize moral change. As a result, the deeper layers of human meaning—emotional, spiritual, and existential—remain largely unexplored within current frameworks of religious and moral education.

Existing research has primarily focused on institutional or behavioral outcomes, often assessing the effectiveness of educational programs through observable indicators such as participation rates, community cooperation, or knowledge acquisition (Pawlewicz & Senetra, 2024). However, these studies rarely examine the subjective dimensions of moral reconstruction: how educators and community members interpret, negotiate, and live out moral values amid post-conflict realities. Consequently, the transformative role of religious educators as meaning-makers in moral renewal has not been sufficiently understood.

This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological inquiry that delves into the lived experiences of those directly engaged in the moral reconstruction process (Dube, 2021). Phenomenology offers a methodological and philosophical framework capable of revealing the essence of moral and spiritual transformation as experienced by individuals, rather than as prescribed by institutional systems. By uncovering how religious educators and community leaders make sense of their actions, relationships, and responsibilities, phenomenological exploration provides a more holistic and human-centered understanding of moral reconstruction. This approach addresses the existing limitations of practical or structural solutions by revealing the inner moral landscapes that shape outward social renewal.

Previous studies on religious and moral education have emphasized the role of pedagogy in shaping ethical consciousness, particularly in post-conflict societies. Researchers such as Al-Faruqi (2021) and Noor (2022) explored how religious instruction contributes to reconciliation and empowerment through faith-based community engagement. However, these works primarily examined observable practices and institutional mechanisms rather than the lived, inner meanings that drive such actions (Bowling, 2022). Phenomenological perspectives remain relatively underutilized in this domain, despite their potential to reveal how educators interpret and internalize moral restoration as a deeply personal and social process. The current research therefore builds upon this scholarly foundation by examining the subjective realities underlying moral and spiritual reconstruction.

To address the identified knowledge gap, this study employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. This approach provides a methodological pathway to uncover how religious educators and community leaders construct, interpret, and embody moral values within the aftermath of social conflict (Robertson, 2022). By focusing on the lived experience, the phenomenological method enables the identification of core meanings that cannot be accessed through surface-level observation or conventional empirical tools. The method responds directly to the need for deeper understanding highlighted in prior literature by revealing how moral transformation occurs within individual consciousness and collective action.

The article is organized as follows: the Introduction presents the conceptual and empirical foundations leading to the research focus; the Method outlines the interpretative phenomenological approach used to explore lived experiences; the Results section presents emergent themes and narrative descriptions supported by participants' direct quotations; and the Discussion interprets these findings within broader theoretical and sociocultural contexts. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the study's essential insights, emphasizing the implications of religious education as a transformative practice in moral reconstruction.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of religious educators and community leaders in reconstructing moral values within post-conflict societies. The phenomenological approach was chosen for its emphasis on capturing the essence of human experience as it is perceived and interpreted by individuals. This design enables a deep understanding of how moral and spiritual meanings are constructed through lived reality rather than through abstract theorization.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed, emphasizing the interpretive process through which participants make sense of their experiences in the socioreligious context (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The interpretative stance allowed the study to move beyond mere description of events toward uncovering the existential and moral meanings embedded in participants' reflections. This approach was particularly relevant to the study's objective to illuminate how religious education functions as a medium of moral and social reconstruction after conflict. Given the sensitivity of post-conflict experiences, IPA was also considered appropriate because it allows participants' accounts to be interpreted carefully within their personal, cultural, and emotional contexts without reducing their experiences to generalized categories.

Participants

Participants consisted of twelve religious educators and five community leaders actively involved in post-conflict moral education and social empowerment initiatives. They represented diverse religious affiliations, including Islamic, Christian, and interfaith educational institutions within the affected regions.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the relevance of their lived experience to the phenomenon under investigation. Recruitment was conducted through community-based educational institutions, religious organizations, and local reconciliation networks. Initial contact was made through institutional gatekeepers who helped identify potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria. However, participation was entirely voluntary, and gatekeepers were not informed about who agreed or declined to participate in order to minimize pressure and protect confidentiality. Potential participants were contacted individually, provided with an information sheet, and given sufficient time to decide whether to participate. Inclusion criteria comprised individuals who (1) had been engaged in religious education for at least three years, (2) directly participated in community empowerment or reconciliation programs, and (3) demonstrated reflective capacity to articulate their experiences meaningfully (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Individuals who had no prior involvement in community-based moral education or who were under psychological distress at the time of data collection were excluded to maintain ethical integrity and emotional safety.

The participants ranged in age from 29 to 57 years, with an average teaching or leadership experience of 8.4 years. Gender distribution was balanced, providing a range of perspectives across gendered experiences of moral reconstruction. This diversity enriched the contextual understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to elicit participants' subjective experiences and interpretations. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet community centers or educational facilities to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Open-ended questions encouraged narrative reflection, focusing on the meanings participants ascribed to their teaching roles, moral reconstruction efforts, and experiences of communal healing. Supplementary field notes were taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual observations (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language used by participants and later translated into English for analysis.

The interview process prioritized empathetic engagement, allowing participants to express their experiences in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Confidential identifiers were used throughout transcription and documentation to maintain anonymity. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen to ensure privacy, safety, and participant comfort. No interviews were conducted in settings where participants could be overheard by community members, institutional representatives, or other participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic, iterative process. The analysis began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain holistic familiarity with participants' narratives (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Meaning units were then identified, highlighting significant statements that captured the essence of moral and spiritual experiences.

Subsequently, codes were developed and grouped into emerging themes that reflected shared patterns of meaning across participants (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). These themes were further refined through interpretative reflection to uncover deeper existential and moral dimensions of

experience. NVivo software supported the organization of codes and facilitated cross-case thematic analysis, but interpretation remained grounded in participants' lived accounts.

The analytic process culminated in synthesizing essential themes that represent the core structure of the phenomenon how religious education fosters moral restoration, empathy, and empowerment in post-conflict contexts.

RESULTS

Reconstructing Moral Consciousness through Religious Pedagogy

Participants described how religious education served as a transformative medium for rebuilding moral values within post-conflict communities. Teachers and community leaders perceived their role not merely as transmitters of doctrine but as moral healers who guided individuals toward reconciliation and ethical renewal. This interpretation was supported by participants' repeated references to trust, forgiveness, shared suffering, and the need to restore ethical relationships after violence. One educator reflected:

"Teaching religion after the conflict was not only about faith it was about restoring trust, forgiveness, and the courage to live together again."

The narratives revealed that the integration of spiritual reflection into community learning sessions cultivated empathy and collective responsibility. Participants emphasized that the process of moral reconstruction required experiential learning rooted in shared trauma and collective healing rather than prescriptive sermons.



Spiritual Empathy as the Foundation of Social Healing

A recurring meaning unit across interviews highlighted the emergence of spiritual empathy the ability to feel and respond compassionately to others' suffering through faith-driven reflection. Educators explained how shared prayer sessions and communal dialogues became safe spaces for expressing pain and rediscovering solidarity.

One participant noted:

"When people prayed together, it felt like the walls between us disappeared. Faith made empathy real."

This spiritual empathy transcended religious boundaries, as communities with interfaith members participated in the same reconstruction programs. The finding underscores that religious empathy when operationalized as dialogical and inclusive—can bridge divisions and reinforce social cohesion in post-conflict recovery.

Transformative Agency of Religious Educators

Participants portrayed themselves as agents of transformation who combined pedagogical authority with moral exemplarity. Their influence extended beyond classrooms into the moral life of the community. Several respondents indicated that the credibility of religious educators depended on their embodiment of forgiveness and justice.

As one teacher stated:

“People believed in the message of peace only when they saw it lived through us.”

This theme indicates that authentic leadership in religious education derives from coherence between spiritual values and public action. The participants’ lived experiences reflected how educational practices become moral performances that inspire reconciliation.

Faith-Based Empowerment and Community Resilience

Another major theme involved the reconstruction of community resilience through faith-based empowerment programs. Educators facilitated skill-building workshops and community dialogues that integrated moral instruction with practical socio-economic activities. The dual emphasis on spiritual awareness and collective productivity helped restore dignity among community members.

One participant explained:

“Empowerment started when we connected faith with action—when people saw that religion could change their livelihood, not just their hearts.” This quotation provides evidence that participants understood empowerment as the practical expression of religious values. The contrast between “livelihood” and “hearts” indicates that faith-based education was perceived as meaningful when it addressed both inner transformation and concrete socio-economic needs.

This theme demonstrates that religious education can function as a holistic empowerment model, intertwining moral revitalization with social and economic recovery.

Interfaith Collaboration in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

The data also illuminated how interfaith partnerships emerged as a form of moral solidarity. Religious educators across different faith traditions collaborated to design joint education programs addressing shared values such as peace, compassion, and justice.

A Christian educator reflected:

“Working with Muslim teachers showed me that moral education has no boundaries—it is about humanity.” This quotation supports the interpretation that interfaith collaboration expanded participants’ understanding of moral education beyond confessional identity. The phrase “no boundaries” indicates that shared moral commitments were experienced as stronger than religious separation.

This cooperative spirit reshaped the moral landscape of post-conflict communities, transforming previously divided groups into networks of shared purpose. Such interreligious cooperation underscores the potential of religious education as a unifying force for long-term peacebuilding and moral reconstruction.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study reveals that religious education in post-conflict societies functions as a deeply human and transformative process, centered on the reconstruction of moral consciousness through empathy, reflection, and spiritual agency. The findings demonstrate that moral renewal is not a product

of doctrinal instruction alone but emerges from the lived experiences of educators and community leaders who translate faith into collective healing and empowerment addressing the core question of how moral reconstruction is experienced and enacted through religious education. However, these findings should not be read as suggesting that religious education is automatically reconciliatory. Rather, the study shows that religious education contributes to peacebuilding only when it is practiced dialogically, reflexively, and ethically, instead of being reduced to doctrinal transmission or identity reinforcement.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide a direct response to the study's guiding question concerning the subjective experiences of religious educators in rebuilding moral values after conflict. Through phenomenological analysis, the study reveals that participants perceive their pedagogical role as a moral vocation rooted in empathy and spiritual engagement (Pabbajah, 2023). Religious education is thus reframed as a process of moral accompaniment a dialogical relationship between educator and community that fosters ethical transformation through shared experiences of pain, forgiveness, and renewal.

This research contributes to the academic understanding of religious education by demonstrating that moral reconstruction is not imposed externally but evolves internally through the reflective interpretation of faith in real-life contexts (Ismail et al., 2021). The educators' narratives show that meaning is constructed through interaction, humility, and mutual trust rather than institutional authority. This insight expands current models of moral education by emphasizing lived spirituality as both the foundation and outcome of moral reconstruction. Hence, the study adds a significant phenomenological layer to the discourse on religious education, positioning it as a participatory act of humanization that restores both moral order and social unity.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The results align with Al-Faruqi's (2021) assertion that religious pedagogy serves as a mediating force in social reconciliation, yet this study advances the conversation by grounding such mediation in lived experience rather than theoretical assumption. Similarly, Noor (2022) identified the empowering function of faith-based education, but the present research extends this understanding by revealing how empowerment is personally and emotionally experienced by educators as agents of transformation (Magness & Mitchell, 2022). The finding that moral leadership emerges through lived coherence between teaching and action resonates with Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of selfhood, where ethical authenticity arises through the narrative interpretation of life experiences.

Moreover, the theme of spiritual empathy echoes the phenomenological insights of Edith Stein, who conceptualized empathy as a bridge between self and other that enables moral recognition and solidarity. In this study, empathy is not merely an emotion but a pedagogical act that reconstructs moral relationships fractured by conflict. By uncovering these dimensions, the research contributes to contemporary debates in phenomenology and moral education by integrating interpretative insights with practical realities of post-conflict healing. The study therefore complements and deepens existing literature by showing that the essence of religious education lies in its capacity to transform suffering into shared moral meaning a process inadequately captured in prior quantitative or programmatic studies.

Implications of the Findings

The findings carry both theoretical and practical implications for the field of religious education and community empowerment. From a theoretical perspective, the study highlights that moral reconstruction after conflict is not solely a pedagogical challenge but a deeply relational and existential one. Religious educators act as mediators of meaning, transforming the collective trauma of communities into opportunities for ethical reflection and spiritual growth. This suggests that moral education should be reframed as a lived dialogical process an ongoing interaction between moral values, emotional resilience, and faith-based reflection (Rahmawati et al., 2024). On a practical level, the findings provide insights for educators, policymakers, and community organizations aiming to design post-conflict programs that integrate moral pedagogy with participatory healing. By acknowledging the centrality of empathy and reflection in rebuilding moral life, these findings can inform faith-based

initiatives and interreligious collaborations seeking to strengthen social cohesion and moral solidarity in divided societies.

Limitations of the Study

As with most phenomenological inquiries, the findings of this research are bound by the contextual and interpretative nature of qualitative exploration (Nawi et al., 2021). The study focused on a specific population of religious educators and community leaders operating within post-conflict regions, which may limit the transferability of results to other sociocultural or religious contexts. Additionally, while interpretative phenomenological analysis provides rich, in-depth insights into lived experiences, it inherently relies on participants' ability to articulate their inner reflections and on the researcher's interpretive sensitivity (Obaid et al., 2024). Thus, the findings reflect contextual depth rather than statistical generalizability. Another limitation is that the study foregrounds educators' constructive experiences of religious education and therefore may not fully capture cases in which religious education contributes to exclusion, resistance to reconciliation, or the reproduction of conflict memory. Future studies should examine both reconciliatory and non-reconciliatory forms of religious education to produce a more balanced understanding of its role in post-conflict societies. Nevertheless, these limitations are intrinsic to the phenomenological paradigm, which values meaning and experience over prediction or measurement. They point to the importance of contextual understanding and reflexivity rather than universality.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research can expand on these findings by exploring comparative experiences of moral reconstruction across different religious traditions and cultural settings (Dutta & Mishra, 2025). Cross-contextual studies could illuminate how various theological frameworks shape educators' interpretations of empathy, forgiveness, and social responsibility. Furthermore, longitudinal phenomenological studies could investigate how moral consciousness evolves over time as communities transition from recovery to stability (Mohd Kusrin et al., 2025). Integrating phenomenological inquiry with narrative or ethnographic approaches may also deepen understanding of how moral values are embodied and transmitted intergenerationally. Such extensions would not only refine theoretical models of religious education but also contribute practical strategies for faith-based reconciliation and moral leadership in global post-conflict societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of religious educators and community leaders in reconstructing moral values within post-conflict societies through a phenomenological lens. The findings revealed that moral renewal emerges from empathetic engagement, reflective teaching, and faith-driven social action, rather than from doctrinal or institutional reform alone. By highlighting the interpretative and experiential dimensions of religious education, the study addressed previous gaps in understanding how moral reconstruction is personally and collectively embodied. The results contribute to both theory and practice by framing religious education as a transformative moral process that fosters empathy, forgiveness, and community resilience. More specifically, the findings imply that religious educators should design learning practices that move beyond formal doctrinal instruction and actively cultivate dialogue, emotional reflection, intergroup understanding, and reconciliation-oriented moral reasoning. In post-conflict classrooms, mosques, churches, pesantren, faith-based schools, and community learning spaces, educators can use storytelling, testimony-based learning, reflective discussion, and collaborative service activities to help learners process trauma, rebuild trust, and internalize values of forgiveness, justice, and social responsibility.

For community-based recovery programs, the study suggests that religious education should be integrated into psychosocial healing, peacebuilding, and local reconciliation initiatives. Community leaders and recovery practitioners can collaborate with religious educators to develop participatory programs that combine spiritual guidance, moral dialogue, trauma-sensitive facilitation, and collective action. Such programs may support survivors and divided communities by creating safe spaces for

shared reflection, restoring damaged social relationships, and strengthening community resilience through faith-based solidarity and practical social engagement.

These insights encourage a shift in post-conflict moral education from prescriptive instruction toward participatory and dialogical transformation. Rather than positioning religious education merely as a mechanism for transmitting moral norms, this study shows its potential as a community-based recovery resource that can support healing, reconciliation, and the reconstruction of social trust. These insights encourage a shift in post-conflict moral education from prescriptive instruction toward participatory and dialogical transformation. Future research may extend this work by comparing cross-religious or cross-cultural contexts to deepen understanding of how faith-based education sustains long-term moral and social recovery.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All research activities, data interpretations, and conclusions were conducted independently and were not influenced by any external parties or funding organizations.

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