



Exploring the Potential of Religious Education in Public Policy Toward a Civilized Society

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a strategic role in shaping individual character and morality, especially when systematically integrated into public policy. This study aims to analyze the contribution of religious education in fostering a civilized society and to identify the challenges and opportunities in its integration into public policy. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study method supported by literature review, data were collected through observation and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Educational policies and regional social programs have utilized religious education as a means of character development, according to the findings. However, challenges persist, particularly concerning resistance to religious approaches in public spaces and limitations in regulatory frameworks. This article emphasizes the significance of multisectoral collaboration and regulatory enhancement to guarantee the systematic and sustainable integration of religious education within public policy. These findings offer theoretical and practical contributions to efforts aimed at cultivating a more harmonious, tolerant, and dignified society through value-based education.

INTRODUCTION

Religious education has long been recognized as a vital instrument in shaping individual character and social harmony, especially amid global dynamics marked by a crisis of values, social conflict, and moral decadence. In various countries, including Indonesia, the challenges of modernity and globalization have prompted an urgent need to strengthen basic human values through religious-based education. When implemented substantially, religious education not only serves as a vehicle for learning rituals, but also becomes the foundation for the formation of morality, integrity, and solidarity in society. In the context of sustainable development, the role of religious education is increasingly strategic because it is able to provide an ethical foundation for citizens' behavior, both in their personal lives and in social relations.

Although the role of religious education is normatively recognized, its integration into public policy still faces various conceptual and structural challenges. On the one hand, there is a need for policies that facilitate the implementation of religious values in various social sectors, including education, law, and character building. On the other hand, there are concerns that religious education will be politicized or misused for the interests of certain groups, thereby threatening the principles of inclusiveness and pluralism. Within this framework, this study positions religious education as a transformative potential in public policy that can create a civilized society – that is, a society that upholds justice, tolerance, and social solidarity.

Theoretically, this study refers to two main approaches: character education theory and the public policy approach. Character education theory explains how religious education can be an effective means of instilling moral values such as empathy, responsibility, honesty, and justice. Meanwhile, the public policy approach allows for analysis of how the state and related institutions design and implement policies that adopt religious values in a systematic and inclusive manner to shape a more civilized society. The integration of these two approaches provides a solid conceptual framework for explaining the dynamics of the relationship between religious education and public policy.

Based on this background, this study was designed to answer two main questions: (1) How does religious education play a role in shaping individual character and morals through public policy to create a civilized society? and (2) What are the challenges and opportunities in integrating religious education into public policy to support the development of a harmonious, tolerant, and dignified society? The purpose of this study is to analyze in depth the contribution of religious education in the framework of public policy, as well as to identify various obstacles and potentials that arise in the integration process.

The main contribution of this article lies in its attempt to develop a theoretical and practical synthesis of policies that prioritize the role of religious education as a key element in the development of a civilized society. This article also offers a new perspective on the importance of collaboration between the state, educational institutions, and religious communities in formulating and implementing public policies based on spiritual and moral values. With a

qualitative case study approach supported by academic literature, this research is expected to make a real contribution to scientific discourse and social policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Character Education Theory

Character education is an important theoretical foundation for understanding the role of religious education in shaping a civilized society. This theory emphasizes the development of fundamental moral values such as responsibility, honesty, empathy, and respect, which are instilled not only in the family environment but also in the formal education system [\[\(https://doi.org/10.24832/kamayi.v1i2.524%20Nugroho, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.24832/kamayi.v1i2.524%20Nugroho, n.d.). Religious education, as an integral part of character education, has great potential in shaping individuals who are not only intellectually competent but also morally mature [\[\(https://doi.org/10.24014/jp.v11i1.18440%20Yani, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.24014/jp.v11i1.18440%20Yani, n.d.). In other words, character education theory views religion as a medium for internalizing ethical values that can shape an individual's personality in the context of social life.

2. Mapping of Previous Studies

Various previous studies have highlighted the importance of religious education in moral and character formation. Research by Kurniasih (2021) shows that the integration of religious values into the primary education curriculum can increase students' moral awareness and strengthen social solidarity [\[\(https://doi.org/10.21580/nw.2021.15.2.8932%20Kurniasih, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.21580/nw.2021.15.2.8932%20Kurniasih, n.d.). Meanwhile, a study by Saragih et al. (2022) confirms that religious education that is dialogical and open to diversity can erode intolerance and strengthen social harmony among students [\[\(https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v16i2.4573%20Saragih, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v16i2.4573%20Saragih, n.d.). These findings show that religious education should not be viewed merely as the transmission of doctrine, but as a transformative pedagogical approach.

3. Research Gap

Although a number of studies have discussed the importance of religious education in character building, there is still a gap in the literature that explicitly discusses how religious education can be integrated into public policy as a long-term strategy for social development [\[\(https://doi.org/10.24042/al-irsyad.v17i1.12399%20Hidayat, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.24042/al-irsyad.v17i1.12399%20Hidayat, n.d.). Most studies focus more on classroom learning practices, without systematically linking them to the design and implementation of state policies. Thus, the urgency of this research lies in filling this gap, especially in the context of Indonesia, which is pluralistic and dynamic in terms of social culture.

4. Position of This Article

This article offers a new approach by examining religious education as an instrument of public policy, not merely as a religious practice or personal

education. By combining case studies and literature reviews, this research encourages the idea that religious values can be strategically implemented in state policy to create a just, tolerant, and civilized society [\[\(https://doi.org/10.18592/al-hikmah.v15i1.7864%E2%80%A0Yusuf, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.18592/al-hikmah.v15i1.7864). This not only broadens the scope of religious education studies but also strengthens the role of policy as an ethical and value-oriented tool of social engineering.

5. Theoretical and Methodological Trends

Current research trends show a shift in approach from dogmatic-oriented religious education to a humanistic and multicultural approach. For example, a study by Suryani (2021) shows that the integration of religious education in a multicultural context encourages the formation of collective awareness of the values of tolerance and respect for differences [\[\(https://doi.org/10.24252/pi.v11i1a4.19377%E2%80%A0Suryani, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.24252/pi.v11i1a4.19377). In terms of methodology, qualitative approaches and case studies are increasingly being used to examine the phenomenon of religious education in greater depth, especially in the context of social policy and character building [\[\(https://doi.org/10.31943/mosharafa.v11i3.2026%E2%80%A0Amiruddin, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.31943/mosharafa.v11i3.2026).

6. Conceptual Synthesis

Based on theoretical studies and previous research results, it can be synthesized that religious education has transformative power in building a civilized society when strategically integrated into public policy. Character education theory provides a conceptual foundation that moral values must be the main orientation of education. Meanwhile, the public policy approach allows for the articulation of these values in the form of concrete programs that are systemic and sustainable [\[\(https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v24i2.813.132-145%E2%80%A0Hasibuan, n.d.\)\]](https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v24i2.813.132-145). By combining the two, this article positions religious education not only as a pedagogical instrument, but also as a strategic policy element in the formation of an ethical and harmonious society.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, combined with a literature review to explore the role of religious education in public policy as a means of forming a civilized society. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the social context, values, and dynamics of policy implementation related to religious education in society.

The types of data used in this study consist of primary data and document data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of religious education practices in the institutional and community contexts that were the focus of the case. Meanwhile, document-based data was collected from official policies, government regulations, and institutional documents related to the integration of religious education in public policy. In addition, a literature review

was conducted by searching for scientific references from reputable open-access journals to enrich the theoretical perspective and empirical findings in support of data interpretation.

Data collection was carried out using two main techniques: observation and documentation. Non-participatory observation was conducted on religious activities in educational institutions and programs run by government agencies with a religious dimension. Documentation involved the collection and study of policy documents, religious education curricula, and relevant legal products. In addition, scientific literature was searched using keywords such as "religious education," "public policy," "character education," and "civilized society" through databases such as DOAJ, Sinta, and Google Scholar.

The inclusion criteria in the selection of documents and scientific references include: (1) published in the last five years (2019–2024); (2) relevant to the issues of religious education and public policy; and (3) open-access. The exclusion criteria included documents that did not undergo a peer-review process, were not relevant to the focus of the study, and articles that were opinions without a clear methodological basis.

The unit of analysis in this study is public programs and policies that integrate religious education values in Indonesia, whether implemented by educational institutions, local governments, or relevant ministries. The focus is on practical and strategic policies that reflect the interaction between religious education and the formation of a civilized society.

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis, with stages including: (1) data organization; (2) identification of main themes; (3) thematic coding based on a predetermined conceptual framework; and (4) compilation of a narrative synthesis of the findings. The analysis was conducted inductively and reflectively, with reference to the theoretical framework of character education and public policy approaches to understand the depth of meaning of the practices studied.

To support data validity, source triangulation was used by comparing the results of observations with relevant documents and literature. This approach allows for stronger internal validity and contextual interpretation of the phenomena studied. With this method, it is hoped that the research results will be able to make a meaningful theoretical and practical contribution to the discourse on religious education and value-oriented public policy development.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this study were obtained through thematic analysis of observational data, policy documentation, and scientific literature reviews. The results were classified into four main themes representing the relationship between religious education, public policy, and the formation of a civilized society.

1. Religious Education as an Instrument of Character Building in Education Policy

Observations and document reviews show that religious education has been explicitly included in the national education curriculum, especially at the elementary and secondary levels, with the aim of instilling character values such as honesty, tolerance, and social responsibility. A study by Ahmad et al. (2022) supports this finding by stating that the religious education curriculum in Indonesia has been directed at developing students' personalities holistically through the strengthening of moral and spiritual values [(<https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v16i1.4349> E2%80%A0Ahmad, n.d.)]. In addition, extracurricular programs such as regular religious activities and spiritual guidance are also an integral part of character building efforts.

2. Implementation of Religious Values in Regional Public Policy

From policy documentation in several local governments, it was found that the integration of religious education in public policy is not only limited to the realm of formal education, but is also implemented through religious social programs that are synergized with regional development missions. For example, the Banda Aceh City Government has implemented the "Gerakan Maghrib Mengaji" (Maghrib Recitation Movement) program as part of a strategy to foster community character based on Islamic values [(<https://doi.org/10.24252/al-banjari.v20i1.27642> E2%80%A0Nasution, n.d.)]. This program receives regulatory and financial support from regional policies, demonstrating that religious education can be used as a tool for shaping a harmonious social culture.

3. Challenges of Integrating Religious Education into Public Policy

Despite these positive initiatives, the study also identified a number of challenges in consistently integrating religious education into public policy. One of these challenges is resistance from certain groups who consider religious education to be a private domain and not suitable as a basis for state policy, especially in a religiously pluralistic society (<https://doi.org/10.24042/ajp.v13i1.9351> E2%80%A0Ismail, n.d.). In addition, there is also a gap between written policies and their implementation in the field, including in terms of budget, human resource capacity, and supervision of the implementation of religious programs.

4. The Potential for Multi-Sector Synergy in Strengthening Religious Education

This study found that the success of integrating religious education into public policy is greatly influenced by inter-institutional synergy. Collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, religious organizations, and civil society can strengthen the values education ecosystem. For example, a study by Huda et al. (2023) shows that a cooperation program between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic community organizations has succeeded in increasing the effectiveness of religion-based character education programs in rural communities (<https://doi.org/10.24832/khazanah.v21i1.9731> E2%80%A0Huda, n.d.). These findings reinforce the argument that a multisectoral approach is necessary so that

religious education is not merely symbolic, but functional and has a broad impact.

5. Strengthening Regulation and Policy Sustainability

The results of the analysis of regulatory documents show that some policies are short-term or lack a strong legal basis, making them difficult to maintain when there are changes in government or development priorities. A study by Lestari (2022) emphasizes the importance of formulating public policies based on religious values in a legally formal and sustainable manner so that they do not depend on momentary political will (<https://doi.org/10.21580/jish.v7i2.10721> E2%80%A0Lestari, n.d.). Strong regulations are an important prerequisite for religious education to play a systemic role in national character building.

DISCUSSION

This research confirms that religious education has strategic potential in shaping individual character and morals when systematically integrated into public policy. The main findings indicate that religious education has become part of character-building efforts within the formal education system and social policies in various regions. This aligns with the main objectives of the research, which are to explore the contribution of religious education to the formation of a civilized society and to identify the challenges and opportunities in its integration with public policy.

In the context of character education theory, these findings confirm that religious values taught thru religious education are highly relevant to character dimensions such as responsibility, honesty, and empathy. As stated by Wahyuni and Saputra (2021), integrating religious values into formal education has proven effective in building a personality based on ethics and humanity [<https://doi.org/10.21580/jish.v7i1.8786> E2%80%A0Wahyuni, n.d.]. Religious education not only plays a role in the transfer of religious knowledge, but also in moral transformation, which is a key pillar in creating a civilized society.

An inclusive public policy approach to religious values is increasingly needed in an era of moral disruption and social conflict. The results of this study show that several regions have taken the initiative to design religious value-based programs that target not only educational institutions but also public spaces and communities. For example, the success of the Maghrib Mengaji program or community-based spiritual development shows how religious values can be operationalized within a concrete policy framework (<https://doi.org/10.24252/jpm.v7i2.30619> E2%80%A0Rahmatullah, n.d.). However, consistent policy governance is still needed to ensure that these integrative efforts do not remain at a ceremonial level.

Compared to previous studies, this article makes a new contribution by highlighting the institutional and regulatory dimensions of integrating religious education into public policy. Most previous studies have focused more on pedagogical practices in schools, without considering how public policy serves

as a systemic platform to strengthen character education. Research by Fitriani et al. (2022) supports the importance of a policy perspective by showing that the success of religious-based character education is highly dependent on the government's commitment to formulating regulations that favor moral values [<https://doi.org/10.24252/ijra.v6i1.26341> E2%80%A0Fitriani, n.d.]).

Theoretically, this article broadens the scope of the character education approach by linking it to the design and implementation of state policies. Religious education is no longer positioned as a private domain limited to the classroom, but as a social instrument that the state can positively capitalize on to build a harmonious, inclusive, and ethical society. This also supports the thesis that religion and policy do not necessarily have to be in tension, but can mutually reinforce each other when managed inclusively and based on universal human values [<https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v13i2.7826> Rizqon, n.d.]). This study acknowledges several limitations, including the limited scope of the study location and the lack of longitudinal data on the long-term impact of public policies based on religious values. Additionally, this research has not deeply explored the dimensions of religious pluralism and the potential resistance from groups adhering to policy secularism. Nevertheless, these findings can serve as an initial basis for further comparative and cross-cultural studies.

Practically, this article recommends the need to improve the capacity of public institutions in managing faith-based programs to make them more professional and accountable. The government needs to formulate policies that are not only normative but also include measurable evaluative indicators in terms of the effectiveness of integrating religious values. In addition, collaboration between the government, academics, religious institutions, and civil society needs to be strengthened so that religious education can truly play a role as a driver of humanistic and progressive civilization [<https://doi.org/10.24252/al-dzikra.v12i1a4.29347> E2%80%A0Anshori, n.d.]).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Religious education has been proven to play a significant role in shaping individual character and morals when systematically integrated into public policy. Through a case study approach and literature review, this research finds that religious education, when designed with a character-based approach and supported by inclusive public regulations, can become a pillar in the formation of a civilized society. The implementation of religious values in educational programs, social policies, and community initiatives has made a real contribution to creating a social atmosphere that upholds honesty, tolerance, and justice.

The main contribution of this article is its approach, which comprehensively combines the dimensions of education and policy, which have rarely been studied together. This article shows that religious education can not only be utilized in the classroom, but also operationalized through strategic and inclusive public policy. By raising regulatory and institutional aspects, this study expands the scope of character education studies to the realm of state policy, which has tended to be separate. In addition, the findings of this study provide a

conceptual and practical basis for building collaboration between institutions in strengthening religious values as part of national development.

As an implication, continuous efforts are needed to strengthen the legal framework, supervisory mechanisms, and cross-sectoral synergies in integrating religious education into public policy. Further research can be directed to explore more broadly the dynamics of implementing this policy in various regions, as well as to examine its longitudinal impact on social transformation and civilization.

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