THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE FORMATION OF INCLUSIVE CHARACTER: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education has a strategic role in shaping the character of students who are not only religious, but also inclusive in facing the realities of a multicultural society. The diversity of religions, cultures, and backgrounds of the people in Indonesia requires Islamic Religious Education to provide guidance on the values of tolerance, moderation, and respect for differences, especially in the field of education. This study aims to understand the role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping inclusive character through a phenomenological approach. The research was conducted in the context of Islamic religious education in multicultural communities in Indonesia, emphasizing the meaning of the experience of inclusivity values in the practice of Islami Religious Education. The phenomenological approach was used to explore the meaning of subjective experiences related to the internalization of the values of justice, compassion, empathy, and social responsibility. The results of the analysis show that Islamic Religious Education is understood not only as a process of imparting religious knowledge, but as a space for the formation of human consciousness that encourages openness, mutual respect, and harmonious coexistence. These findings confirm that Islamic Religious Education plays an important role as an instrument for inclusive character building and strengthening social cohesion in Indonesia's multicultural society.

Keywords : *Islamic Education; inclusive character; phenomenology; multicultural society; Indonesia*

Abstrak

Pendidikan Agama Islam memiliki peran strategis dalam membentuk karakter peserta didik yang tidak hanya religius, tetapi juga inklusif dalam menghadapi realitas masyarakat multikultural. Keberagaman agama, budaya, dan latar belakang masyarakat di Indonesia menuntut Pendidikan Agama Islam untuk memberikan tuntunan terhadap nilai-nilai toleransi, moderasi, dan menghargai

setiap perbedaan terutama dalam bidang pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami peran Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam pembentukan karakter inklusif melalui pendekatan fenomenologis. Penelitian dilakukan dalam konteks pendidikan agama Islam pada lingkungan masyarakat multikultural di Indonesia dengan menekankan pada pemaknaan pengalaman nilai-nilai inklusivitas dalam praktik Pendidikan Agama Islam. Pendekatan fenomenologi digunakan untuk menggali makna pengalaman subjektif terkait internalisasi nilai keadilan, kasih sayang, empati, dan tanggung jawab sosial. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Pendidikan Agama Islam dipahami tidak sekadar sebagai proses penyampaian pengetahuan keagamaan, tetapi sebagai ruang pembentukan kesadaran kemanusiaan yang mendorong sikap terbuka, saling menghormati, dan hidup berdampingan secara harmonis. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa Pendidikan Agama Islam berperan penting sebagai instrumen pembentukan karakter inklusif dan penguatan kohesi sosial dalam masyarakat multikultural di Indonesia.
Kata Kunci : Pendidikan Agama Islam; karakter inklusif; fenomenologi; masyarakat multikultural; Indonesia

A. Introduction

Indonesia is known as a country with a high level of diversity, both in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, and social background. This diversity presents its own challenges for the world of education, especially in shaping the character of students so that they are able to live together peacefully, fairly, and with mutual respect. Education is not only required to transfer knowledge, but also to instill human values that are relevant to plurality (Ekowati & Rahardjanto, 2025). In this context, Islamic Religious Education occupies a very important position, because in addition to presenting a normative dimension, it also has the potential to shape an inclusive character in a multicultural society.

Philosophically, Islamic Religious Education aims to shape individuals who are faithful, have noble character, and are able to carry out their social roles responsibly. According to Al-Attas in (Husaini & Adian, 2010), Islamic education not only produces individuals who are ritually pious, but also shapes civilized individuals who are able to place the value of faith in social life in a proportional manner. However, in practice, Islamic Religious Education is still often understood in a limited way as a process of conveying doctrine or religious knowledge that is cognitively oriented. This approach tends to neglect the affective and social dimensions of religious education, making it less effective in fostering inclusive and empathetic attitudes amid diversity (Lamere, 2025).

Several previous studies have shown that Islamic Religious Education plays an important role in fostering tolerance and religious moderation. (Sundari et al., 2025) found that integrating multicultural values into learning helps shape students' tolerant attitudes. Research (Nasaruddin et al., 2025) confirms that religious education oriented towards empathy and social justice can strengthen inclusive character. Meanwhile, (Rudiana et al., 2025) shows that the internalization of the values of empathy and social responsibility in religious education contributes to the creation of harmonious social relations in a pluralistic society.

In this study, inclusive character is understood as an individual's ability

to accept, appreciate, and interact positively with religious, cultural, and social diversity. This character not only includes cognitive tolerance but also involves affective and behavioral dimensions reflected in empathy, justice, openness, and social responsibility. Individuals with inclusive character are able to build dialogue, cooperate, and resolve conflicts peacefully in a pluralistic social life.

Inclusive character also reflects the awareness that differences are part of social reality that must be managed constructively. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this character is manifested through the internalization of the values of compassion, justice, and human brotherhood that transcend religious identity. Thus, religious education not only shapes individual piety, but also develops social piety oriented towards the common good. This dimension is important in a multicultural society such as Indonesia, where cross-identity interactions occur intensely in everyday life.

Furthermore, research on Islamic Religious Education in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society tends to place educational institutions at the center of analysis, while the dynamics of social interaction in society have not been a major focus. In reality, however, the formation of an inclusive character does not only occur in the classroom, but also through social experiences, role models, and daily practices in the community. This limitation indicates a need to understand Islamic Religious Education as a living and contextual social practice.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by using a phenomenological approach that places the subjective experiences of students, educators, and the community at the center of analysis. This approach allows for the revelation of profound meanings regarding how the values of justice, empathy, compassion, and social responsibility are internalized in the real lives of a multicultural society. Thus, this study provides a new contribution to the development of Islamic Religious Education studies that are more contextual, reflective, and experience-based.

This study was conducted because understanding subjective experiences is key to designing a more inclusive and contextual model of Islamic Religious Education. Without this understanding, Islamic Religious Education risks becoming formalistic, losing its transformative power as an instrument for shaping human consciousness and strengthening social cohesion. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions by enriching phenomenology-based Islamic Religious Education studies, as well as practical benefits as a reference for educators and policymakers in designing religious education that is responsive to multicultural societies.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as a place for shaping inclusive character through the real experiences of students. Unlike previous studies that emphasized theory or formal assessment, this study views IRE as an active social practice, where students learn and interact directly with others from various backgrounds in a multicultural society.

Based on this background, this study aims to understand the role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping inclusive character through a phenomenological approach. The research focuses on the meaning of the experience of inclusivity values in the practice of Islamic Religious Education, emphasizing the internalization of justice, compassion, empathy, and social

responsibility, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of PAI as a space for shaping human consciousness that encourages openness, mutual respect, and harmonious coexistence.

B. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. The phenomenological approach is used to understand and reveal the meaning of subjective experiences and research subjects in interpreting the role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping inclusive character in a multicultural society (Pahutar et al., 2024). The focus of the research is directed at the experiences, awareness, and meanings of individuals regarding the values of justice, compassion, empathy, and social responsibility that are internalized through the practice of Islamic Religious Education in everyday social life. This research was conducted in Senduro Village, Senduro District, Lumajang Regency, East Java. This location was chosen because Senduro Village is an area with a multicultural community, where diversity in religion, culture, and social background coexists relatively harmoniously. The intense social interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as well as the strong local tradition of maintaining tolerance and social harmony, make Senduro Village a relevant empirical context for examining the role of Islamic Religious Education in inclusive character building.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from research subjects, including Islamic Education teachers, students, religious leaders, and community leaders who are directly involved in the practice of Islamic Education and the social life of the multicultural community in Senduro Village. Secondary data was obtained from supporting documents, such as the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, education policy documents, archives of religious and social activities, and scientific literature relevant to the research focus. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to explore the subjective experiences and interpretations of research subjects regarding the internalization of values of inclusivity in Islamic Religious Education. Participatory observation was conducted to directly understand educational practices and social interactions that reflect attitudes of tolerance, empathy, and social responsibility in community life. Documentation was used to reinforce and verify data from interviews and observations.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenological approach. The analysis process began with reviewing all data to identify important themes from the participants' experiences. Next, the data were organized based on theme and understood in depth to capture the meaning of those experiences. In the final stage, the researcher compiled a description explaining how Islamic Religious Education plays a role in shaping an inclusive character in the multicultural community of Senduro Village. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the researcher used various sources and methods of data collection, as well as requesting confirmation from the research participants so that the results corresponded to their experiences.

C. Results And Discussion

Results

The results of the study show that Islamic Religious Education in Senduro Village is understood as an important space for shaping an inclusive character that emphasizes human values and togetherness. In addition to being understood as a normative learning space, Islamic Religious Education is also interpreted by students as a social experience that shapes the way they view differences. In their daily interactions, several students described how the religious learning process made them more comfortable interacting with friends of different religions. They no longer saw differences as boundaries, but as part of a social reality that must be respected. This experience arose especially when they were involved in joint activities, such as group work at school and social activities in the community. This situation encourages them to learn to understand other people's perspectives and to foster a sense of empathy and mutual respect.

A similar experience was also felt by Islamic Education teachers. Teachers interpret learning not only as the delivery of material, but as a process of shaping social awareness. In practice, they deliberately create spaces for dialogue and reflection so that students are able to understand the value of tolerance in context. Educators describe that when students are given the opportunity to interact directly with diverse communities, they more easily internalize the values of justice and compassion. This process does not happen instantly, but develops through repeated experiences in social life.

At the community level, religious and community leaders view Islamic Religious Education as a means of building harmonious social relationships. They observe that young people who receive religious education with an inclusive approach tend to have an open attitude towards differences. This can be seen in their active involvement in village activities, such as mutual cooperation, deliberation, and interfaith social activities. In their experience, these interactions not only strengthen social solidarity but also foster awareness that diversity is part of the moral and humanitarian teachings of Islam.

Furthermore, some students interpreted this experience as part of a spiritual journey. They felt that respecting others did not diminish their religious identity, but rather strengthened their understanding of Islamic teachings that emphasize mercy and justice. This awareness developed through reflection on their daily experiences, especially when they encountered situations of difference firsthand. Thus, the internalization of the value of inclusivity occurred not only at the level of knowledge, but also at the level of consciousness and inner experience.

Based on in-depth interviews with educators, students, and community leaders, PAI is not only seen as a place for imparting religious knowledge, but also as a means of building awareness of living together fairly and with mutual respect amid religious and cultural diversity. The informants emphasized that the religious education they received encouraged an open attitude toward differences and fostered awareness of the importance of maintaining social

harmony.

Participatory observation shows that the internalization of inclusivity values takes place through various social practices in community life. In one village mutual assistance activity, researchers observed the involvement of Muslim students alongside non-Muslim residents in cleaning the environment and repairing public facilities. Interactions took place openly without any restrictions based on religious background. The conversations that took place during the activity showed mutual respect and a willingness to work together for the common good. This situation shows that the value of tolerance is not only understood theoretically but has become part of social habits.

In addition, in school activities, the researcher also observed cooperation between students from different religious backgrounds in group activities. The students appeared accustomed to discussing, sharing tasks, and resolving conflicts through dialogue. When differences of opinion arose, they demonstrated a willingness to listen to each other and seek solutions together. This experience shows that the Islamic Religious Education learning process has an impact on the students' social interaction patterns, making them more inclusive and adaptive.

In certain religious activities, such as Islamic holidays, researchers also found non-Muslim communities participating in the social aspects of these activities, such as helping with preparations and logistics. This participation is not seen as a compromise of their beliefs, but as a form of social solidarity and togetherness. For the Muslim community, this interaction is interpreted as a practice of Islamic teachings on compassion and social justice. These experiences show that Islamic Religious Education contributes to the formation of a collective awareness of living together in harmony.

The interviews also show that the internalization of the value of inclusiveness occurs through reflective experiences and social role models. The example set by educators and community leaders in being fair and open to differences has a major influence in shaping an inclusive understanding of religion. Islamic Religious Education is understood as a process of learning living values, in which social experiences are the main source for constructing religious meaning. These findings are in line with the phenomenological approach that emphasizes life experiences as the main basis for understanding education (Hidayatullah, 2024).

In addition to shaping inclusive character individually, PAI also contributes significantly to strengthening social cohesion in a multicultural society. The values taught in PAI become the moral foundation for Muslims to build solidarity, mutual trust, and shared responsibility. This can be seen from the active participation of Muslims in social activities with non-Muslims, which is understood as a tangible manifestation of the values of rahmah (mercy) and social justice in Islam. This involvement is seen as an integral part of religious practice, not as a compromise of their religious identity.

Overall, Islamic Religious Education serves as social capital that strengthens social integration and harmony in Senduro Village. PAI not only plays a role in shaping individual piety, but also builds collective awareness to live peacefully side by side. The results of this study are in line with Al-Attas' view in (Safitri & Suniarti, 2025) that the goal of Islamic education is to shape civilized

individuals who are able to combine faith, knowledge, and moral values in social life. Recent research also confirms that values-based and socially experiential religious education plays an important role in shaping inclusive character and strengthening social cohesion in a pluralistic society (Anwar et al., 2025).

D. Discussion

The discussion in this study explains that Islamic Religious Education, when applied in a multicultural context, has transformative potential that transcends its instructional and ritualistic functions. The findings of this study indicate a shift in the orientation of Islamic Religious Education from an approach focused on the analysis of laws and regulations to a humanistic and contextual approach, in which Islamic values are interpreted as ethical guidelines in building fair and inclusive social relations. This shift shows that Islamic Religious Education can function as a space for shaping human consciousness that is relevant to the social reality of Indonesia's diverse society.

From the perspective of Islamic education theory, these findings can be analyzed through the concept of ta'dīb proposed by Al-Attas (Rachmadianti & Haryanto, 2025). Islamic education aims not only to convey religious knowledge but also to shape civilized individuals who are able to balance faith, knowledge, and morality in social life. The context of a multicultural society shows that this civility is manifested in attitudes of mutual respect, social justice, and collective responsibility. Thus, Islamic Religious Education plays a role as a process of internalizing manners that does not stop at the individual dimension but extends to the social sphere.

This discussion also shows that the values of inclusivity in Islamic Religious Education are more effectively internalized through social experiences and role models than through a purely cognitive approach. This is in line with the phenomenological approach, which places life experiences as the main source of educational meaning formation (Wita & Mursal, 2022). Religious education rooted in social experience enables students and the community to understand Islamic teachings in a reflective and contextual manner, thereby encouraging the emergence of an open and dialogical religious attitude. These findings reinforce the argument that an experience-based approach is highly relevant in the development of Islamic Religious Education models in multicultural societies (Mutmainah et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that Islamic Religious Education has a strategic function in strengthening social cohesion. Islamic values emphasized in Islamic Religious Education, such as justice, compassion, and empathy, serve as social capital that encourages solidarity and mutual trust among citizens. Within the framework of Islamic theory, this can be linked to the concept of ukhuwah insāniyyah, namely human brotherhood that transcends religious identity (Mahmud, 2025). Islamic Religious Education, in this context, serves as a means of forming collective awareness to live peacefully side by side in a pluralistic society.

Furthermore, this discussion reinforces the relevance of the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah paradigm in Islamic Religious Education. The adaptation of Islamic Religious Education that emphasizes the protection of human dignity, social

justice, and the common good shows that religious education does not conflict with diversity but has a strong theological basis to support multicultural life (Tjondro et al., 2025). The findings of this study add to the literature on Islamic Religious Education by showing how the principles of maqāṣid are actualized in educational practices and social life.

Thus, this discussion affirms that Islamic Religious Education has a strategic role as an instrument for shaping inclusive character and strengthening social cohesion in a multicultural society. The main contribution of this study lies in revealing the meaning of Islamic Religious Education from the perspective of community social experience, which has received little attention in previous studies that tended to focus on the institutional context of formal education. These findings have theoretical implications for the development of a more contextual paradigm of Islamic Religious Education, as well as practical implications for the design of Islamic Religious Education learning that is relevant to the challenges of diversity in Indonesia.

E. Conclusion

Islamic education in a multicultural society has strategic potential to shape inclusive character and strengthen social cohesion. Learning based on social experience and role models enables the internalization of human values such as justice, empathy, compassion, and social responsibility, so that students and the community are able to understand Islamic teachings in a reflective and contextual manner. The paradigm of Islamic Religious Education that integrates ethical values, the principles of maqāṣid al-sharīʻah, the concept of civilized human beings, and ukhuwah insāniyyah shows that religious education can serve as an instrument for shaping collective awareness that supports peaceful coexistence amid plurality.

Based on these findings and analyses, several recommendations can be proposed. Practically, Islamic Religious Education should be designed and implemented with a contextual approach that emphasizes social experiences, interactions across differences, and moral exemplary behavior from educators and community leaders. This can increase the effectiveness of internalizing the value of inclusiveness and strengthen social solidarity in a multicultural society. Theoretically, this research encourages the development of an Islamic Religious Education model that balances religious, ethical, and social dimensions, as well as broadening the perspective of religious education research from the institutional realm to the realm of real community experiences.

This conclusion confirms that Islamic Religious Education is not only a means of religious learning, but also a vehicle for social transformation that can foster inclusive character, collective awareness, and sustainable social cohesion, making it relevant to the challenges of pluralistic society in Indonesia and a reference for the development of education policy at the local and national levels.

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