

Tolerance in Multireligious Schools: Practices and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complexities of implementing religious values in a Buddhist-based kindergarten in Cirebon, which has a diverse religious composition among its students. Although the majority of the students are Christian, the school incorporates Buddhist rituals and values into the teaching and learning process. The research employs a qualitative design with a semi-ethnographic approach, gathering data through participatory observation, formal and informal interviews, and field notes collected from July to September 2022. The findings reveal an ambivalence in the purpose of teaching Puja Bakti. On one hand, it is seen as a way to instill moral values, but on the other, it is treated as a form of worship. This ambivalence may lead to confusion among the children regarding the actual purpose of the ritual. Economic constraints also play a significant role in limiting the school's ability to provide appropriate religious education for all students. The study suggests the need for a more inclusive and sensitive approach to religious diversity, with an emphasis on developing a curriculum that includes interfaith and intercultural learning, as well as clear explanations of the objectives behind each religious activity. Greater financial support from the government or donors, along with community collaboration, is necessary to address these economic challenges. By doing so, the school can create an educational environment that respects all beliefs, instills universal moral and ethical values, and promotes tolerance and peace among the children.

Keywords: *Tolerance; Religion; Early childhood education programs;*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kompleksitas penerapan nilai-nilai keagamaan di sebuah taman kanak-kanak berbasis Buddha di Cirebon yang memiliki keberagaman agama di antara murid-muridnya. Meskipun mayoritas murid beragama Kristen, sekolah ini menerapkan ritual dan nilai-nilai agama Buddha dalam proses belajar mengajar. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan pendekatan semi etnografi, di mana data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara formal dan informal, serta catatan lapangan selama periode Juli hingga September 2022. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya ambivalensi dalam tujuan pengajaran Puja Bakti, yang di satu sisi dianggap sebagai cara untuk

mengajarkan nilai-nilai budi pekerti, namun di sisi lain juga diperlakukan sebagai bentuk ibadah. Ambivalensi ini dapat menimbulkan kebingungan di kalangan anak-anak terkait tujuan sebenarnya dari ritual tersebut. Hambatan ekonomi juga menjadi faktor penting yang membatasi kemampuan sekolah untuk menyediakan pendidikan agama yang sesuai bagi semua murid. Penelitian ini menyarankan perlunya pendekatan yang lebih inklusif dan sensitif terhadap keberagaman agama, dengan penekanan pada pengembangan kurikulum yang mencakup pembelajaran lintas agama dan budaya, serta penjelasan yang jelas tentang tujuan setiap kegiatan keagamaan. Dukungan finansial yang lebih besar dari pemerintah atau donor, serta kolaborasi komunitas, diperlukan untuk mengatasi tantangan ekonomi ini. Dengan demikian, sekolah dapat menciptakan lingkungan pendidikan yang menghormati semua keyakinan, menanamkan nilai-nilai moral dan etika universal, serta mempromosikan toleransi dan perdamaian di antara anak-anak.

Kata Kunci: Toleransi; Agama; Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini;

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a diverse nation rich in religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural variety, faces significant challenges and opportunities in maintaining social harmony. The internalization of religious values is clearly articulated in Pancasila, the state ideology, particularly in the first principle, "Belief in One Supreme God," which guarantees every citizen's right to practice their religion according to their beliefs (Rolfe, 2004). The Indonesian government officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, reflecting the plurality present in Indonesian society

In a diverse society like Indonesia, conflicts rooted in cultural and religious differences still frequently occur, as seen in Maluku, Poso, Kupang, West Kalimantan, and Central Kalimantan (Harahap, 2018; Robinson, 2006). These conflicts not only threaten social harmony but also undermine common goals, incite anger and confusion, and damage trust and emotional relationships between groups (Harahap, 2018). Therefore, maintaining social cohesion in a pluralistic society is a crucial challenge.

In addressing these challenges, the practice of tolerance becomes key to maintaining social harmony. Religious tolerance is defined as an open attitude without suspicion towards individuals or groups of different faiths, along with mutual acceptance of one another (Rosyad, Mubarok, Rahman, & Huriani, 2021). This openness is crucial for fostering genuine tolerance, where tolerance not only prevents conflict but also promotes peace and affirms humanity as a global issue embraced by all religions.

Education plays a strategic role in upholding the values of peace and tolerance. This is reflected in the National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003, Article 12, Paragraph (1), Subsection a, which states that every student in any educational institution has the right to receive religious education according to their faith, taught by a teacher of the same religion. However, in practice, there often arises a phenomenon of narrow-minded fanaticism among adherents of different religions, which contradicts the spirit of tolerance (Sukoco, 2015).

Previous research has shown that some teachers in Indonesia hold intolerant views, desiring students of different religions to convert as part of

religious proselytization (Nisa et al., 2019). This fanaticism is even indicated to occur at the early childhood education level. In some cases, this intolerance is either directly or indirectly encouraged through teachings or attitudes toward children of different religions (Hasim, Budiyanto, & Hutabarat, 2022; Farisia, 2020). Another study by Amalia (2018) revealed that religious tolerance in early childhood education in Pontianak is marked by the dominance of Islam, despite the ethnic and religious diversity. Teachers often implement policies that are insensitive to the religious diversity of the children, such as uniformly teaching the Arabic script (*hijaiyah*), which has the potential to suppress the religious identity of children from different faiths.

The issue of tolerance at the early childhood education level is crucial because this is when the foundation of basic values is being established. Young children are highly susceptible to environmental influences, including intolerant views they may absorb from adults around them, such as parents, teachers, or the community. Amalia's (2018) research provides a strong basis for further study by revealing how the dominance of a particular religion in education can impact the suppression of other religious identities. This research needs to be examined more deeply to understand these dynamics in various geographical and cultural contexts. One aspect requiring special attention is how non-Islamic schools in regions with high religious diversity, such as Cirebon, address religious tolerance. This study offers novelty by examining religious tolerance in non-Islamic schools in Cirebon that accommodate students from various religious backgrounds. In this context, the research explores how the policies and practices at these schools strive to facilitate inclusivity and acceptance of all religions without the dominance of any single religion.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on non-Islamic schools operating in a religiously diverse environment. This study aims to make a significant contribution to understanding how religious tolerance can be developed in educational settings different from those previously studied, such as schools with a dominant religion. The article seeks to elucidate the practice of religious tolerance in early childhood education in Cirebon, a city with a long history as a center for the spread of Islam as well as ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious diversity. By examining religious tolerance practices at the early childhood education level in Cirebon, the study aims to provide insights into how tolerance values can be implemented from an early age, fostering a generation that is more open and appreciative of differences.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with the aim of exploring social phenomena within the context of teaching religious tolerance in early childhood education. A semi-ethnographic approach was chosen because the study does not meet the minimum duration required for full ethnographic research but still adheres to its core principles (Fush, Fusch, & Ness, 2017; O'Reilly, 2021). Data collection took place at a private Buddhist-based kindergarten in Cirebon, which has religious diversity among its teachers and students, from July to September 2022. The research subjects included four teachers, the school principal, and all children from the playgroup to the B class.

The primary instrument in this study is the human instrument, with the researcher acting as the tool for data collection through participatory observation, formal and informal interviews, and field notes. The human instrument in qualitative research has the advantage of flexibility to adapt to the natural environment (Carter, Shih, Williams, Dageling, & Mooney Somers, 2021; Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022). Formal interviews were conducted at the initial stage of the research, followed by informal interviews during observations to confirm specific events. Observations were carried out participatorily, with the researcher actively involved in learning activities to observe natural interactions among school members.

Data were analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach. The analysis process included the initial coding phase, where each line of data was assigned a name, and the focused coding phase, which concentrated on significant codes to reveal new findings or enrich existing knowledge (Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998; Eisenhardt, 2007; Charmaz & Keller, 2016). During the data development stage, data were broken down into smaller segments and then labeled or coded to represent concepts or ideas emerging directly from the data. Subsequently, the researcher identified relationships among the emerging codes, carefully reviewing the codes created during the open coding phase to determine which were most relevant for theory development.

The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation and reflexivity. Triangulation is achieved by comparing various data sources and participant responses, while reflexivity involves acknowledging potential barriers that may influence the research outcomes, such as social awkwardness and the physical condition of the researcher (Rose & Johnson, 2020; Cresswell, 2021).

RESULTS

This research was conducted at a kindergarten (TK) under the auspices of the Buddhist Foundation in Cirebon. Despite being based on Buddhism, the TK exhibits significant religious diversity among its students, including Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Buddhists. However, the teaching practices at this TK primarily focus on Buddhist values and rituals.

Miss E, one of the teachers at the TK, explained that the use of Buddhist values and rituals is due to the school being under the auspices of the Buddhist Foundation:

"Because here, with various religions, how we pray, we praise God, Yes Buddha.. this is a Buddhist Foundation why eventually use the Buddha, because this is a Buddhist Foundation." (Interview with Miss E, August 12, 2022)

Despite being under the Buddhist Foundation, the majority of the children attending the school are Christians. Miss L explained that the number of Buddhist children is very small, around 4-5 children:

"Here dominated by Christians. Buddhists are rare. Yes indeed in Cirebon those who are Buddhist are very few, the elders. Most of the

children go to Christian schools, Santa Maria. If Buddhists are mostly outside the island where tradition is still strong, so it is not contradictory but more inclined towards Buddhism, so not too much. There are about 4-5 children who are Buddhists." (Interview with Miss L, Friday, September 2, 2022)

The decision to implement Buddhist worship practices and values at the school is seen as a form of respect for the Buddhist Foundation that oversees the school. Religious rituals at the school, such as Puja Bakti, are considered ways to instill moral values and virtues in children. Miss L explained:

"Regarding religion, no, we just do Puja Bakti. It's like Puja Bakti, if Christian they have services. But because we often use the term services, but more precisely we perform Puja Bakti as a form of respect." (Interview with Miss L, Friday, September 2, 2022)

The Puja Bakti ritual, conducted every Friday, is considered a form of respect and a way to teach children moral values. However, in practice, Puja Bakti is also taught as a form of worship. Observations during the Puja Bakti ceremony showed that children were taught to respect the place of worship and refrain from other activities during worship:

"Service time for prayer, are you good not to play at the place of worship?" (Headmaster, Field Notes, Friday, August 12, 2022)

Although teachers perceive that religious practices at the school focus on moral values, in reality, the Puja Bakti ritual is also taught as a form of worship. Miss L acknowledged that the school does not have specific religious lessons, but continues to conduct Puja Bakti as a way to teach moral values:

"As for religion, we don't have specific lessons, in elementary school they have religious lessons, but here we don't have religious lessons, but one day we do Puja Bakti in a Buddhist way, today, well I don't teach Buddhism like this, but I lean towards virtues, goodness, like earlier talking about the consequences of liking to lie." (Interview with Miss L, Friday, September 2, 2022)

Nevertheless, there is hope among teachers to provide space for children who are not Buddhists to learn their own religious values. Miss L explained:

"If the school (mentions the school's name) they can bring in their own religion teachers, for example their own religion, Muslims on Tuesday, there is Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, there was discourse like that before, but considering the very minimal cost, so it can't." (Interview with Miss L, Friday, September 2, 2022)

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the complexities in implementing religious values in a school under a Buddhist foundation but with religious diversity among its students.

Although the school is formally affiliated with a Buddhist foundation, the majority of students are Christian, creating challenges in implementing inclusive religious practices. The school must demonstrate equal respect for all religions present in the school community, ensuring that all religions are recognized and honored in school activities (Glen, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Kong, 2005). Developing a curriculum that includes education about various religions and cultures is crucial, including teachings about sacred days, religious practices, and core values of different religions. Additionally, the school can focus on universal moral and ethical values that are acceptable to all religions, such as honesty, tolerance, and kindness (Kunzman, 2012; Muzumara, 2018).

The implementation of religious rituals such as Puja Bakti at this school shows an ambivalence in the teaching objectives. On one hand, teachers view Puja Bakti as a means to impart values of morality and goodness. On the other hand, the ritual is also taught as an act of worship, which can create confusion among children about the true purpose of the ritual. To address this ambivalence, it is important for the school to provide consistent and clear explanations about the purpose and meaning of each religious activity conducted, as well as to consider ways to respect the religious diversity among the students (Laksana, 2019; Abell, Manuel, & Schoeneman, 2015).

Economic constraints also play a crucial role in limiting the school's ability to provide appropriate religious education for all students. Despite teachers' willingness to allow all children to learn their own religious values, financial limitations make this challenging. Budget constraints affect the school's ability to hire religious educators, provide adequate facilities and resources, organize inclusive religious activities, and develop a multicultural curriculum. To address these issues, greater financial support from the government or donors is needed, along with collaborative efforts from the school community to explore more cost-effective solutions.

To address the ambivalence in religious rituals, the school should provide clear and structured explanations about the purpose and meaning of these rituals, focusing on the inclusive moral education aspect rather than just viewing them as acts of worship. The school can develop a curriculum that includes teaching about various religions and cultures, emphasizing not only the ritual aspects but also universal moral and ethical values (Fausi, 2020; Farisia, 2020). Additionally, the school can optimize existing resources by organizing joint activities involving the entire school community, such as cultural festivals celebrating religious diversity. These activities can be conducted at low cost while having a significant impact.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of an inclusive and sensitive approach in implementing religious education in schools with religious diversity and offers practical recommendations to address economic challenges and ambivalence in teaching religious rituals.

CONCLUSION

This research illustrates the complexity of applying religious values in a Buddhist-based kindergarten in Cirebon that has religious diversity among its students. Despite the majority of students being Christians, the school implements Buddhist rituals and values in its teaching process. Ambivalence in the teaching

goals of Puja Bakti, seen as a way to impart moral values while also serving as a form of worship, can cause confusion among children.

To address this ambivalence, the school needs to provide consistent and clear explanations about the purpose and meaning of each religious activity conducted, as well as consider ways to respect religious diversity among students. Economic barriers also play a significant role in limiting the school's ability to provide suitable religious education for all students. Greater financial support from the government or donors, along with collaborative efforts from the school community, are needed to overcome this challenge.

Overall, this research emphasizes the importance of an inclusive and sensitive approach to religious diversity in early childhood education. This approach involves not only respecting all religions within the school community but also developing a curriculum that includes learning about various religions and cultures. Thus, schools can create an educational environment that respects all beliefs, instills universal moral and ethical values, and promotes tolerance and peace among children.

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