

Religion-Based Character Education Management: A Co-optation Approach in Education

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Abstract

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Character education tended to be co-opted by religious values through numerous conceptual and practical approaches. This study underscored the co-optation of religion in the character education process as applied at an Islamic boarding school. The didactic stages were trapped to articulate religious-based character only; thus, the complex meanings of character were narrowed by overlooking other potential principles. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation using the institution's curriculum design. The findings indicated that leaders and teachers had a significant role in co-opting religious values for conceptualizing the schooling program. This was revealed in the curriculum content encompassing dominant spiritual standards. Equally, students' understanding of character appeared to be constructed by devout teachings. A slight character interpretation was exposed by religious perspectives co-opted by leaders, teachers, and curriculum. Therefore, the slender construal of character was disposed disregarding further principles having valuable points. This study recommended the need for stakeholder consideration, especially educational institutions, and Islamic boarding schools, for accommodating other values in shaping the pupils' character, thus they were capable to compete with increasingly constricted global changes dynamically.

Kata kunci:

Kooptasi, agama, karakter, education, islamic boarding

Abstrak.

Pendidikan karakter cenderung terkooptasi oleh nilai agama melalui berbagai pendekatan konsep dan praktik. Studi ini semakin mempertegas kooptasi agama dalam proses pendidikan karakter sebagaimana dipraktikkan di lingkungan pesantren mahasiswa. Proses pendidikan yang berlangsung di pesantren terjebak pada artikulasi karakter yang hanya didasarkan pada nilai agama semata, sehingga makna karakter yang kompleks cenderung disempitkan dengan pengabaian potensi nilai yang lainnya. Pengumpulan data dalam studi ini menggunakan observasi, wawancara dan studi dokumentasi berupa kurikulum yang diterapkan di pesantren. Temuan studi ini menunjukkan bahwa keberadaan pimpinan dan guru di pondok pesantren memiliki peranan penting dalam mengkooptasi nilai agama dalam konseptualisasi kurikulum pendidikan. Hal itu ditunjukkan dalam konten kurikulum yang digunakan memuat prinsip agama secara dominan. Demikian pula, pemahaman mahasiswa tentang karakter tampak dikonstruksi dengan ajaran agama. Pandangan yang sempit tentang karakter hanya ditunjukkan dengan perspektif agama yang dikooptasi melalui pimpinan, guru dan kurikulum. Dengan demikian, pemaknaan karakter yang disempitkan tersebut cenderung mengabaikan nilai-nilai lain yang memiliki potensi dalam pemaknaan karakter yang kompleks. Studi ini menyarankan perlunya perhatian stakeholder khususnya lembaga pendidikan dan pondok pesantren dalam mengakomodasi nilai-nilai yang lain, sehingga santri mampu bersaing secara dinamis dengan perubahan global yang semakin ketat.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, character education has become an intense and extensively discussed issue in education, along with the increasingly declining students' behavior. This problem had caused the advent of several stakeholder responses to the educational tactic for the character crisis issues but had not contributed to refining the students' morality. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) noted that in 2017, 320 children were involved in numerous criminal acts such as theft, mugging, motorcycle gangs, murder, brawls among pupils, and so on (kpai.go.id). Even from 2011 to 2018, 11,116 children were involved in criminal cases (Yusuf, 2019). Concerns had also arisen grounded on the assumption that teenagers were the successors greatly determining the nation quality. As revealed by Tanzil, young people's value was a requirement for the state's future progress (Salim, 2018). The ideal youth's capacities as the next generation ought to receive well-balanced educational teachings between general knowledge and character education (Nawawi, 2011).

The development of teens' current condition has attracted academics and researchers' attention in exploring the importance of several methods for character education to achieve national education goals. There were at least three leanings on character education research. The first issue was the notion and application of character education in institutions (Abdullah et al., 2019; Ramdhani, 2017; Hendriana & Jacobus, 2017; Jalil, 2016). Abdullah et. al found that the enactment of character values could be seen through the curriculum used by schools (Abdullah et al., 2019). The second issue was related to the character education model as a solution for the learners' moral and behavioral crisis (Dalmeri, 2014; Subianto, 2013; Cahyo, 2017), as well as the impact of the pupils' moral emergency (Pabbajah et al., 2020). Furthermore, the third issue was associated with the accommodation of cultural and religious principles in character education (Muhsinin, 2013), allied to religious ethics integrated into character building (Mudlofir, 2016; Rahardjanto & Susilowati, 2018). From these three tendencies, it appeared that limited attention was given to how a value is used as a basis for character formation originating from various ideologies in society.

This article aimed to accomplish previous research limitations on character education topics that had not yet looked at the diverse sources of values for adolescents' character construction. In general, this study demonstrated the occurrence of religious co-optation in character education, as experienced in the learning process at an Islamic boarding school. Three research questions were formulated: (1) How was the conceptualization of character shaped in the educational process at an Islamic boarding school? (2) How are religious values co-opted in the curriculum and management of Islamic boarding schools as a stage for character formation of students? (3) How was the student reception of the character learning process at the Islamic boarding school? The questions functioned as a foundation to answer the issues investigated in this article.

This study was arranged based on three paradigms. First, the enactment of the character education approach still relied on formal education which disregarded informal edification schemes such as Islamic and public boarding schools' values. The application of character education in informal educational institutions underlined more on practice and role models in teaching character grounded on the ideology adopted. Second, the submission of religious-based character education in informal schools led to a reduction of the character values imparted in formal education, following the co-optation of religious values in the education process. Third, the conceptualization of character education and the curriculum used by boarding schools illustrated how the space of varied values was restricted only to religious-based education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted at Al-Hikam Islamic Boarding School in Malang City. The research object was chosen for combining college and traditional *pesantren* systems that were open for accepting students from various universities, both state and private ones with an orientation

for shaping the pupils' character. The data was taken using three methods, namely; direct observation, interviews, and documentation. Interviews with leaders and teachers as key informants were employed to explore the principles of character conceptually. Furthermore, open interviews with survey methods were distributed to the learners regarding the reception of character education. Likewise, a documentation study was directed using the curriculum used in the teaching and learning process at the institution.

Four participants were interviewed as the research subjects to gain the data. The first informant was the Islamic boarding school caretaker since he was in charge of all activities at the school. The head of the curriculum was selected as the second participant for the reason that he was accountable for the curriculum development. Furthermore, the head of the Ma'had Aly was involved because he was liable for all Ma'had Aly activities. The last participant was a teacher at the *pesantren*. Meanwhile, the survey was distributed to 32 students randomly selected, consisting of male and female pupils from various classes to find out the students' views as a whole. The questions were specified related to the student's understanding of character, the basis used in character education, how the character was applied in the Islamic boarding school, values expected in character formation, the forms of character adept in the school, responses to the presence of character education in the Islamic boarding school, and suggestions for character education program.

Data collection was carried out through interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted using WhatsApp media, either through group or personal chat, then contacted directly via cellular network. The documents are in the form of voice recordings and interview scripts. Then the data was analyzed using Case-Based Qualitative Analysis with a focus on an in-depth study of the character of education, curriculum and management of Islamic boarding schools as stages of character formation for students, and student acceptance of character education. Researchers collect data from various sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cases studied, build and conceptualize the information.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Student character was not culturally constructed but had been religiously shaped with religious doctrine affecting principles used as a reference for character formation. At least three pieces of evidence could be exposed to enlighten the argument related to the religious-based character construction: religion-based character conceptualization, curriculum design referring to religious values, and student interpretation of character.

Religious Bias in Character Conceptualization

In educational institutions, the character paradigm cannot be separated from leaders' or mentors' views. On several occasions meeting key informants from Islamic boarding school leaders, character education tended to be based on religious values as a source of character learning. The character was associated with the ability to practice religious teachings well for achieving proudly scientific achievements and being capital in facing life's challenges (interview, AR, 2020). The identical argument was also stated by the head of the Islamic boarding school, MN, arguing that character was having moral behavior, and instilling religious values, including the motto of the Islamic boarding school, specifically religious practices, scientific achievements, readiness for life, and *ruhul ma'had* (the soul of the Islamic boarding school). Likewise, MF contended that the character automatically performed actions or a habit without thinking. This routine arose because of continuous completion. Meanwhile, ZN maintained that character was a trait that could be attached to a person having positive impacts on himself and others. Thus, the character was an Islamic moral attached to an individual reflecting a positive attitude (interview, 2020).

In practice, religious routines were demonstrated by performing the 5 daily congregational prayers, sunnah prayers, night prayers, *dirosah*, studying yellow books, memorizing the Qur'an, reciting *shalawat*, reciting *rotibul hadad*, *wirid*, *tablil*, *istighosah*, studying after maghrib and Sunday

morning, and *khotmil* Qur'an. Scientific achievements were illustrated by conducting studies in the chosen field well, completing assignments properly, graduating on time, getting good grades/achievements, participating in scientific work training, conducting research, participating in journalism training, and any training that was following the studies taken. Furthermore, the implementation for life readiness comprised participating in leadership, and management training, being active in organizations, doing religious service, internships, health training, skills training in and outside the field being studied, and being active in communities around the Islamic boarding school.

In the Islamic boarding school, the employment of character education was carried out through three categories. First, during a learning process, it was implemented by coming on time, greeting, starting and ending activities with prayer, getting used to shaking hands, displaying a healthy, orderly, and regular lifestyle, and motivating the students to be enthusiastic in gaining knowledge. Second, it was obtained through mentoring by positioning the learners as subjects in Islamic boarding school activities. They were given a space to study and organize a group by joining the Al-Hikam Islamic Boarding School Student Organization (OSPAM). The agendas covered household activities such as cleanliness, health, optimizing academic achievement, and facilitators of students' aspirations and creativity. Third, it was attained through daily practice in understanding prayer, both its laws and performs, practicing sincerity through environmental cleanliness and night guard duty, supporting the pupils to struggle when they did something for others, integrating a culture of tolerance, mutual understanding and sharing, and instilling an orderly life for oneself and others.

Religious Values in Character Education Curriculum

Three aspects were sought to be achieved in the *pesantren* curriculum. The first one was the affective aspect (attitude or value system), specifically being devoted to Allah by becoming religious, having good morals, ethics, and personality, keeping responsible, having an attitude of *tayammum*, *tawasut*, *tawazun*, and fairness, respecting multiculturalism, internalizing the spirit of independence, fighting, and entrepreneurship, social sensitivity, and practicing Islam *rahmatan lil alamin*. The second one was related to cognitive aspects (knowledge), namely understanding *nahwu*, *saraf*, and *mantiq* for the proficiency in reading books, mastering the science of *fiqh*, being able to develop critical, logical, systematic, innovative, and creative thinking, understanding the concept of the environment sourced from the Qur'an and hadith, mastering basic Islamic knowledge, being capable to study Arabic literature in Islamic science, understanding scientific methodology, and mastering the concepts of interdisciplinary Islamic studies. The third one was psychomotor aspects (skills), that was being able to read books and explain their meanings, implementing the basics of Islam based on the values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*, reading the Qur'an with correct tajwid, and performing worship well and consistently.

In the Islamic boarding school, the teaching materials were mostly based on the Qur'an and hadith for each lesson. Apart from that, several classical Islamic books were used for strengthening references in character formation, including the Book of *Mukhtashar Ihya Ulumiddin (Mursyidul Amin)* (Sufism, morals, Fiqh), the Book of Al-Hikam ibn Athaillah Assakandari (wisdom, morality), the Book of Tafsir Jalalain (about thematic interpretation), the Book of Al-ajrumiyah (nahwu), the Book of Nashaihul 'ibad, the Book of Kifayatul Atqiya' Sufism, morals), the Book of Mukhtatlarul Hadith (wisdom of hadith, the virtues of worship), the Book of Bidayatul Hidayah (fiqh, morals), the Book of At-tahdzibu wa At-targhib (fiqh), the Book of Ta'limul Muta'allim (morals), the Book of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah's Minutes (understanding facets, signs of the end times), and the Book of Usul fiqh (rules of fiqh, arguments, determining a law).

The methods applied in character education were depicted in three ways. The first technique was classical teaching as an in-class learning process for all students with material content according to their respective ability levels programmed in four class stages. Furthermore, collective coaching was the teaching program of yellow books (with predetermined

material/books) by Kyai or senior teachers followed by all pupils together in the mosque. Moreover, individual teaching was designed for learners in grade IV (final class) using material adjusted to the field of each student's interest to deepen their understanding of religious acquaintance.

Meanwhile, four learning methods were employed in the classroom, namely the wetonan or bandongan, sorogan, discussion (Munazharah), and evaluation methods. In the wetonan or bandongan technique, the materials were delivered by the teacher with reading and explaining the contents while the students listened, interpreted, and accepted. In the sorogan method, the teacher read the book and its meaning, whereas the students repeated the teacher's reading. The discussion method was implemented by a group of students discussing a problem with the teacher's guidance. Additionally, the evaluation method was employed through tasks, obligations, and work. The description above demonstrated that the character teaching method in Islamic boarding schools was classical, collective, and individual.

Table 1. Three Basic Character Values in the Islamic Boarding School

Religious practices	Scientific achievement	Life readiness
Prayer	Good academic competence	Individual responsibility
Zikir	High learning motivation	Spiritual in life
Classical book study	Analytical	Life Considerations
Quran memorization	Good memory	Social Sensitivity
Sholawat	Concentration and Focus	Calmness in facing something
Istighosah	Loyal learner	Social resilience

Source: Islamic Boarding School Curriculum, 2019

The three components in Table 1 were the basis of character education in the Islamic boarding school curriculum.

Religious Construction and Student Reception of Character Education

Several student perceptions about character were collected from the existing data. Most students regarded that character was perceived as morals, nature, traits, attitudes, principles, manners, characteristics, habits, personality, nature, and values inherent in a person. Others argued that character was correlated to individuals' moral values. Character is human's behavior towards God Almighty, oneself, fellow human beings, the environment, and the nation manifested in thoughts, attitudes, feelings, words, and actions based on religious norms, law, manners, culture, and customs. Character was defined as an inner nature that influenced all thoughts, behaviors, morals, and nature possessed by humans or other creatures. From these perceptions, students tended to articulate character with behavior, morals, and nature.

Character education was manifested in actions. Several indicators of the learners' character in religious practices included praying in congregation at the mosque, *sunnah rowatib* prayers, *dhuha* prayers, night prayers, *wirid*, *istighosah*, and studying yellow books. The manifestation of the student's character in scientific achievements was completing assignments on time, getting good grades, having a scientific attitude in conducting research and community service, having the ability to write scientific papers, having the capacity to read the yellow book of *tafsirul* Qur'an, having the skill to interpret and study the yellow books, and being capable to read and interpret the Al-Qur'an. The appearance of the pupils' character in readiness for life counted in being able to solve problems, playing an active role in organizations, contributing to organizations, working independently or in teams, being responsible for the tasks given, having a good work ethic, mastering the field being studied, communicating well, having a good social spirit, having skills, and carrying out community service. Therefore, the students' character was manifested through understanding the existence of Allah and the Messenger, thinking and acting scientifically, and integrating knowledge and practice in real life.

In the Islamic boarding school, the character was comprehensively formed. Character education was carried out through habituation, mentoring, and teaching to shape individuals' noble morals. Students were educated to obey worship, think scientifically and complexly, build their morality to survive in life, respect each other, be polite, work together, and obey the rules. Although implementing character education had been well-conceptualized, it still required to be well-controlled and evaluated. Since Islamic boarding schools have students from various campuses and different study programs, it should instill character in a broader sense and balance between the world of *pesantren* and academics.

Discussion

A successful character education program requires good educational management. Educational leadership is not only related to responsibility but also influences others in the educational environment to achieve goals and requires action in a certain form, one of which is related to students' understanding of the meaning of character which is very closely related to the leader's understanding. (Connolly et al., 2017).

In Islamic boarding schools, learning grounded on religious values both conceptually and practically brought a positive bias in character formation. Religious values functioned as the main foundation in realizing the student character had been practiced for a long time in the learning process in Islamic boarding schools. This further emphasized that ethics and religion were two inseparable aspects in forming individuals' character. In character education, the Islamic perspective was often paired with moral education (Islamic ethics) (Sukardi, 2016). The importance of religious values became a positive bias in character education, for the reason that religious standards contained moral ideals that indirectly presented the co-optation of religion over character education, as trained by Islamic boarding schools' figures in conceptualizing education. Following Abdullah (2017), religious teachers or those represented by *kyai* or *ustadz* were highly likely to generate any knowledge constructed by covering religious acquaintance as legitimacy.

This study demonstrated the occurrence of religious co-optation in character education in three aspects. First, it was applied through leaders and mentors integrating religious practices, scientific achievements, and life readiness in shaping the students' character. Second, it was employed through the curriculum set as the main reference in the learning process in Islamic boarding schools. Third, it was elaborated through exemplary practices both via ritual worship and social transactions. These three components affected religious characters, responsibility, respect, hard work, care, independence, and discipline with religious principles as the most dominant ones. Therefore, the co-optation of religion in character education was unquestionable. Character education was seen as morals, where morals were often realized as identical to students' character (Idhar, 2019), making religion and manners the groundwork of character education (Saleh, 2017).

The co-optation of religion in education confirmed the bias of religious values as the basis of character formation. Religion tended to be benefitted as the main underpinning for every hope and vision that would be aimed for. In character education, religion was also the first base declared (Indrawan, 2016; Jalil, 2016; Setiawati Nanda Ayu, 2017). Character formation was greatly influenced by religious education and the internalization of religious values toward the students (Hakim, 2015). Even Islamic boarding schools were educational institutions that could act as models of character education in Indonesia with various cultures elaborated in the system (Zuhriy, 2011). This was proof that religious bias in character formation was inevitable as experienced in Islamic boarding schools. In this case, there had been a construction of knowledge that originated from religious teachings as the core underpinning all learners' behavior. The ongoing co-optation of religion had an impact on a person's readiness to practice religious teachings in their daily lives.

Religion could be used as a support and solution for the complexity of increasingly degraded moral and spiritual problems (Pabbajah et al., 2020). Thus, the co-optation of religion through religious practices had possibilities to grasp scientific achievements, as well as capital in the life sustainability in society in the future. The relationship between religion and character

education has been understood from various perspectives, which tended to view that individual and communal life was inseparable from the teachings of each religion and belief (Abdullah, 2017; Abdullah et al, 2019). With this reality, character formation went hand in hand with the religious practices that were believed and carried out. (Zurqoni et al., 2018). Likewise, a study conducted by Pabbajah et al (2020) claimed that there had been a moral shift due to the intensity of industrialization in the education curriculum. The curriculum was employed as a tool to achieve educational goals, comprehensively containing competencies that ought to be accomplished. This affected the students' reception of character compartmentalized in religious values. In this case, the industrial revolution in educational institutions resulted in the loss of students' morality (Pabbajah et al., 2020). Furthermore, education was entombed in industrial interests accentuated the students' cognitive aspect more than the affective one (Jubba & Pabbajah, 2018). Previous studies also conferred character education through the formal education process (Subianto, 2013; Sumarno, 2011). Therefore, one of the significant offers that this study would like to put forward was stressing that the learning process highlighting the aspect of religious practice had brought a noteworthy contribution to character education in Islamic boarding schools. The Islamic boarding schools' traditionalism and culture were the capital and model in character construction with the characteristic of spiritualism of religiosity practiced in a balanced and sustainable manner.

Studies finding the co-optation of religion in character education had a vital meaning in understanding character. The process of comprehending character began with religious learning integrated into a thoughtful of religious teachings through actual practice (Fahham, 2013; Kholil, 2011; Rohmadi, 2017). Islamic learning, for example, through classical books comprising explanations of ethics and morals, was an imperative source of learning in character formation (Arifin, 2014; Said, 2013). Similarly, the educational process adept by kyai and ustadz in the pesantren tradition had significantly influenced the students' behavior. Moreover, understanding character was not always executed through the educational process in the classroom but was more exemplified over activities outside the classroom. In other words, the character was designed not only to the point of understanding concepts but was experienced and exemplified by institution leaders (Widyatmoko et al., 2020). Character formation was central for defining manners in learning as educational capital, and was also imperative in understanding education itself, in the sense that the integration of religious practices was in line with a person's behavior in social activities. The character was seen as attitude, behavior, morals, and disposition. The majority's understanding of character was more inclined towards morals, including the institution leaders' views. This portrayed that there was a co-optation of religion in character education, bringing the character definition narrower and unable to describe the broader character description. Its implementation was limited to religious values, thus weakening the understanding of the character itself.

This condition had a bearing on the construction of students' understanding of character to be slight and locked when focusing on religious values only. Additionally, the curriculum forced students to absorb all religious values. From this study's findings, several aspects required more attention, especially in the educational process in Islamic boarding schools. This was as perceived by the students related to the concept of character education in Islamic boarding schools that tended to be co-opted with religion statically, thus being less dynamic without paying attention to other aspects, such as each student's family background, culture, and traditions.

Although the educational environment had a significant role in character education (Ramdhani, 2017), there were cultural factors that were also vital and often ignored (Agustini, 2015; Khodijah, 2018; Rosyad & Zuchdi, 2018). Character which was broadly interpreted was not limited to religious values, but also nationalism, freedom, independence, cooperation, and integrity (Santoso, 2013). Students' perception and understanding of character were crucially explored by assessing that character was only observed from the perspective of attitude, nature, and behavior. Other perspectives also needed to be collaborated for character formation processes. Thus, this study's offer, aside from being a model, also recommended evaluating the leaders' and teachers'

competence who tended to be superior and centralistic in the *pesantren environment* (Fadhilah, 2011; Kesuma, 2017; Masrur, 2018). Also, a comprehensive and contextual approach was crucial to accommodate the traditional views of *pesantren* so that the learners were ready to competitively strive in the global world.

CONCLUSION

Islamic boarding school education management needs to integrate religious values systematically into the education curriculum. This is important to ensure that character education does not only focus on religious aspects but also includes universal values that can shape students' characters holistically.

The ongoing character education process tended to be co-opted by religious values, resulting in narrowing the space for diversity. Ignoring the potential of multiplicity had restricted the chance to understand the character itself. This study evidenced that the character education process applied in *pesantren* was co-opted by Islamic values represented by leaders and teachers. Character education had carried religious bias in the character conceptualization, by including religious values only in the character education curriculum. The curriculum had been constructed based on the leader's and teachers' understanding and religious beliefs. With these conditions, the character description was ensnared in the articulation of attitudes, traits, and behaviors, then integrated with the term morality in Islam which was full of religious norms as the foremost root. Similarly, students' reception of character was limited to religious standards, while cultural ethics having the potential to shape the pupils' character was neglected. The approach used in this study borrowed the concept of religious co-optation in viewing the process of character education in the Islamic boarding school, allowing the discovery of a synchronization of religious principles in the education process, by accommodating the teachers' perspectives, curriculum and students as the research objects. The teacher's perception of character had been manifested in the teaching materials used as references, at the same time the teacher's ideas about character had been structured by the texts employed as the learning sources. Thus, the character conceptualization was constructed grounded on religious values.

This article was limited to gaining the data from an Islamic boarding school so it could not record the reality comprehensively. Therefore, a comparative study was required by considering different characteristics of Islamic boarding schools. Through this research, the cooptation of religion in character education could be found to have its weaknesses and strengths. Much research on character education had been conducted, but few had discussed the cooptation of religion on character education, so it was crucial to conduct a study related to the cooptation of religious values in character education. Thus, the contribution of educational institutions' ideas could be a problem-solution for the needs of character formation that were constantly changing and being debated.

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