

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION (CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES) "ESSENTIALISM AND RECONSTRUCTIONISM

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Abstract

This research is essential because the paradigm of Islamic education faces challenges in maintaining a balance between core Islamic values and the demands of increasingly complex global social change. This study aims to analyze the philosophical thought of Islamic education from the perspectives of essentialism and reconstructionism as an effort to respond to the challenges of modern education. This research employs a qualitative method with a library research approach, where the subjects are the concepts of essentialism and reconstructionism, and the object is the implementation of these two concepts in Islamic education. Data were collected through a literature review sourced from books, journals, and relevant scientific articles, and then analyzed descriptively using content analysis techniques. The findings reveal that essentialism emphasizes strengthening moral and spiritual values to develop religious consciousness, although it requires adjustment in facing scientific advancements and global cultural shifts. On the other hand, reconstructionism focuses on renewing the understanding and application of Islamic values to ensure they remain contextual with the dynamics of society. The synthesis of these two approaches produces an Islamic education paradigm that is both firmly rooted in values and adaptive in responding to change, while also encouraging positive participation in the global order.

Keywords: *Contemporary Challenges; Educational Philosophy; Essentialism; Islamic Education; Reconstructionism*

A. Introduction

Islamic educational philosophy serves as a foundational framework that plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and goals of education based on Islamic values. Within this perspective, education is not merely understood as a process of knowledge transfer, but as a comprehensive effort to shape a whole person – an individual who is faithful, knowledgeable, and of noble character. The emphasis on character formation is increasingly relevant in addressing global challenges that often overlook Islamic values amidst the currents of modernization and globalization (Rahmatullah & Kamal, 2023).

In facing an increasingly open and dynamic social reality, Islamic education is expected to function not only as a medium for transmitting religious traditions, but also as an educational system capable of producing critical, adaptive generations with a strong Islamic identity. Education in this framework is seen not merely as intellectual training, but as a process of character and spiritual development that prepares students to remain steadfast amid rapid social changes (Soniya et al., 2020).

The advancement of technology and globalization has provided unlimited access to information, especially for younger generations. This phenomenon offers positive opportunities but also threatens the Islamic character of students. Therefore, Islamic education plays a strategic role in reaffirming foundational Islamic values derived from the Qur'an and Hadith in the face of modernity (Tobing et al., 2024).

Within the general framework of educational philosophy, critical, systematic, logical, and reflective thinking patterns are characteristic features that drive education to remain relevant amid changing times. This is also a key foundation in Islamic education, where strengthening these philosophical principles is essential to ensure that the character-building process aligns with Islamic values and can respond to complex socio-cultural dynamics (Mochtar & A'yun, 2024).

One philosophical approach relevant to Islamic education is essentialism. Essentialism emphasizes the importance of mastering fundamental and essential values in the educational process. Amid the rapid changes of modern society, essentialism offers value stability as a foundation for navigating change without losing direction. This concept aligns with the mission of Islamic education, which places core values such as faith, worship, and morality at the heart of education (Kamila et al., 2024).

As a school of thought, essentialism believes that education should focus on character formation through the inculcation of universal and enduring values. These values are expected to build students' moral resilience against the influence of global ideologies that may conflict with Islamic principles. In the context of Islamic education, essentialism can be adopted as a strategy to preserve the continuity of Islamic teachings amid modern challenges (Kamila et al., 2024). Issues in the digital age further highlight the urgency of instilling essentialist values in Islamic education. The digital era fosters new learning habits, instant cognitive patterns, and a pragmatic lifestyle that may blur the deep understanding of Islamic values. Therefore, Islamic education must reaffirm the importance of core values such as faith, honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and politeness in every learning process (Astuti et al., 2024).

Besides essentialism, the reconstructionist approach is also significant in developing contemporary Islamic education models. Reconstructionism, as presented by Theodore Brameld, stresses that education should be a tool for reconstructing social order and creating a better society through critical and dialogical processes. In this context, reconstructionism provides a framework for developing students as agents of social change rooted in Islamic values, while remaining adaptive to contemporary challenges. Comparing essentialism and reconstructionism in this study is expected to strengthen Islamic educational models that are not only conservative in preserving values but also progressive in facing social transformation (Astuti et al., 2024).

Another challenge facing Islamic education today is the value disorientation among youth. The culture of instant gratification and pragmatism as a consequence of technological advancement often sidelines moral and ethical considerations, even within educational environments. Essentialism, with its emphasis on core values, offers a solution to this disorientation by reaffirming the essence of Islamic education based on the Qur'an and Hadith (Astuti et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the debate about the integration of Islamic and secular sciences remains a challenge that contemporary Islamic education must address. Islamic education is expected not only to teach religious texts but also to prepare students to contribute to global society. Integrating essentialism with Islamic values in this context offers a balanced framework between mastering knowledge and building Islamic character (Abdullah, 2022). The imbalance between knowledge acquisition and character building remains a serious issue in Islamic education. Often, student success is measured only by academic achievement, while moral and spiritual aspects are neglected. Essentialism reminds us of the need to balance knowledge mastery with character development to create a holistic educational experience (Azwar et al., 2024).

Theoretically, Islamic education that integrates essentialist values is believed to be capable of producing *insan kamil* – the ideal human being in Islamic perspective who is not only intellectually intelligent but also spiritually mature and morally upright. The essentialist approach aligns with this goal by placing core values at the center of the educational process (Fitriah & Mahsun, 2025).

Previous studies by Salsabila et al. have shown that applying essentialist values in Islamic religious education positively impacts student character formation. However, the study was limited to general school contexts and did not explore in depth how essentialism could be holistically integrated into the Islamic education system. This opens opportunities for further research (Fitriah & Mahsun, 2025).

The discourse on integrating Western educational philosophy and Islamic values in shaping Muslim student identity is also a vital part of Islamic education development. This approach opens up critical dialectics in adapting essentialism into the Islamic educational framework so that education is not only aimed at preserving local cultural values but also at strengthening religious character consistent with Islamic teachings (Rahmatullah & Kamal, 2023).

Moreover, the study by Haryadi et al. on integrating Islamic values into online learning systems provides insights into how Islamic education adapts to digitalization challenges. However, this study has yet to specifically examine the relevance of essentialism as a foundational framework in embedding Islamic values in the digital education era, thus warranting further exploration in this area (Haryadi et al., 2024).

The urgency of character education in responding to globalization and value disorientation has become an inescapable issue in the development of contemporary Islamic education. The rapid flow of information, dynamic social changes, and technological disruptions demand that students' character be strengthened so they remain grounded in Islamic values. Therefore, Islamic education is not only required to preserve fundamental principles such as essentialism, but also to reinterpret these values in an adaptive and contextual framework so students can navigate the complexities of global realities without losing moral direction (Alam et al., 2023). Beyond theoretical studies, several Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia have begun implementing essentialist values in their curricula in response to globalization and digitalization challenges. For example, at Darul Hikmah Islamic Boarding School in Yogyakarta, a character education model based on essentialism is applied through the strengthening of three main pillars: Qur'anic memorization, the habituation of proper etiquette, and the development of critical logic based on classical texts. This pesantren balances mastery of classical Islamic sciences with the integration of contemporary thought, so that students excel spiritually while remaining adaptive to modern issues. The school consistently emphasizes character formation through essential values such as trustworthiness, honesty, and responsibility in both formal and informal educational activities. This approach has proven effective in shaping students who are not only religious but also competitive in the digital era (Faizin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, in the framework of educational philosophy, the essentialist ideas of figures such as William C. Bagley (1938) emphasize the importance of education as a means of transmitting knowledge, skills, and essential values that have stood the test of time. When contextualized in Islamic education, this thought aligns with the Islamic epistemological principle that places revelation (Qur'an and Hadith) as the primary source of truth, alongside reason and experience. In this view, the concept of *'ilm* in Islam is not only regarded as the result of rational processing but also as a manifestation of internalizing *tawhidic* values that guide the formation of the ideal Muslim character (*insan kamil*) (Herawati et al., 2024).

In comparison, essentialism in the Western tradition often regards knowledge as objective, rational, and structured, while in Islamic epistemology, knowledge includes a transcendental dimension that links cognitive reality with spirituality. This makes Islamic education not only oriented toward material mastery but also emphasizes spiritual purification and moral cultivation as integral parts of the educational process (Hafizh et al., 2023).

Thus, the essentialist-based educational model in Islam cannot be separated from the educational goals of *tazkiyah an-nafs* (purification of the soul) and *ta'dib* (moral refinement),

as emphasized by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. He argued that the success of education is measured by how far a person understands, appreciates, and practices values in harmony with human nature. This concept further reinforces the position of essentialism in Islamic education as a core strategy for building moral resilience and Islamic identity in the face of globalization (Ridwan & Maryati, 2024).

This research aims to analyze how essentialist values can be integrated into the Islamic education system to strengthen students' character and Islamic identity in facing the challenges of globalization and digitalization. Additionally, it seeks to formulate an alternative model of Islamic education based on essentialism that is contextual and responsive to the demands of the times. The contributions of this research are expected to be both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it aims to enrich Islamic educational theory, particularly in designing an educational approach that balances Islamic core values with contemporary challenges. Practically, this study is intended to serve as a reference for educators, policymakers, and educational institutions in designing Islamic educational systems rooted in values that are aligned with modern realities.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach with a focus on the philosophical examination of Essentialism and Reconstructionism within the context of Islamic education. As a library research, this study relies on scholarly literature as the main data source, including books, journal articles, and other academic works. The selection of literature is based on its relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding these two philosophical schools within Islamic education. The range of publication years analyzed spans the last two decades, ensuring alignment with recent developments in the field. Content analysis is applied as the primary method, allowing the researcher to extract key themes and patterns of thought contained in the analyzed texts (Attaqy et al., 2025).

The content analysis process is carried out through several systematic stages. First, thematic coding is conducted to identify the main themes that emerge from the texts. Then, relevant categories are formed based on similarities or differences in the ideas contained within the texts. This process refers to certain philosophical frameworks, such as hermeneutics to interpret deeper meanings of the texts or ideological critique to explore the impact of underlying ideologies. This method enables the researcher to understand the social and cultural contexts that underpin the analyzed texts, as well as to identify patterns of thought that shape contemporary Islamic educational discourse (Nurislamingsih & Heriyanto, 2024).

As a methodological foundation, this study refers to key references in qualitative, library-based research, such as Bogdan & Biklen (2007), Creswell (2016), and Merriam (2009), who state that content analysis in qualitative research focuses on deep understanding of the social and cultural context underlying the texts being analyzed. To facilitate understanding of the methodology used, a flowchart of the methodological process will be presented in the appendix. This diagram illustrates the steps of data

collection, thematic coding, category formation, analysis, and conclusion drawing, helping readers comprehend the thought process and analytical procedures applied in this study (Haryoko et al., 2020).

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings of this research reveal that Essentialism, as an educational philosophy, holds a significant position within Islamic education due to its emphasis on the transmission of core knowledge and values. Essentialism advocates a return to traditional cultural values that have been tested over time, which are believed to be central in preserving societal stability and moral integrity. In the context of Islamic education, Essentialism prioritizes the preservation and transmission of religious knowledge, particularly the Qur'an, Hadith, and other classical Islamic teachings, while simultaneously instilling essential values such as discipline, respect, and moral conduct. Furthermore, Essentialist thought stresses the importance of core subjects like literacy and numeracy as the foundation for a well-functioning society. Essentialist educators consistently emphasize the importance of a stable and well-structured curriculum, in line with Curriculum Theory, which prioritizes the mastery of core knowledge. However, Essentialism also demonstrates a tendency to resist excessive flexibility, which is often perceived as a threat to the integrity and continuity of traditional Islamic educational values. Despite its strengths, the findings indicate that Essentialism faces substantial challenges in the modern era, particularly the tension between the preservation of traditional values and the demand for innovation, as well as the difficulty of incorporating flexibility and creativity into the curriculum to address evolving educational and societal needs.

On the other hand, the findings show that Reconstructionism offers a more progressive and dynamic approach to Islamic education, emphasizing critical thinking, social awareness, and the transformative role of education in addressing social issues. Reconstructionism aligns with Critical Pedagogy, which seeks to empower students to critically examine and challenge unjust social structures while promoting social justice. In the framework of Islamic education, Reconstructionism encourages the revision of outdated curricula and the integration of contemporary issues, including technology, global politics, and social justice, while still upholding Islamic principles. The findings highlight the importance of reform and modernization within Islamic education, as well as the influence of intellectual figures such as Muhammad Iqbal, who emphasized the need for a holistic educational model that nurtures both spiritual and intellectual development. Reconstructionist thinking also supports the application of Innovative Pedagogy, which fosters active student engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of critical thinking skills. Additionally, it prepares students to address real-world global challenges—such as poverty, inequality, and environmental concerns—through the ethical and moral lens of Islamic teachings. Nevertheless, Reconstructionism is not without

criticism, especially when applied to Islamic education. The findings indicate concerns regarding the potential dilution of Islamic values when modern, secular, or global perspectives are introduced without sufficient caution. The ongoing challenge lies in balancing innovation and progress with the preservation of the purity and authenticity of Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of finding a balanced position between the stability offered by Essentialism and the progressive vision proposed by Reconstructionism. Essentialism, while providing a solid foundation of religious and moral values, risks becoming stagnant if it lacks space for adaptation in response to contemporary issues. Conversely, Reconstructionism promotes necessary reforms but may overemphasize societal change, which can lead to the neglect of core religious values. As a result, the study concludes that an Integrative Educational Approach would be the most effective way forward for Islamic education. This approach seeks to combine the strengths of both philosophies: maintaining the religious and moral stability of Essentialism while adopting the openness and responsiveness of Reconstructionism to modern educational challenges. Through this balanced integration, Islamic education could produce individuals who are both grounded in their faith and fully prepared to engage critically and constructively with global realities.

Finally, the research findings underline the crucial role of Educational Leadership in facilitating this integrative process. Leaders in Islamic education are expected to navigate the complex tensions between tradition and innovation, ensuring that the preservation of Islamic values remains at the core of the educational mission while responding to the evolving needs and realities of contemporary society. Strong leadership is necessary to ensure that Islamic education remains both relevant and authentic in a rapidly changing world

2. Discussion

This study explores the philosophical perspectives of Essentialism and Reconstructionism in Islamic education, aiming to understand how both schools of thought can shape the practice of education in the modern world.

The Philosophical Framework of Essentialism and Reconstructionism in Islamic Education

This study explores the philosophical perspectives of Essentialism and Reconstructionism in Islamic education, aiming to understand how both schools of thought can shape the practice of education in the modern world. Each philosophy offers unique contributions to Islamic educational theory and practice, especially in addressing the dynamic tension between preserving tradition and embracing progress.

The Essentialist Role in the Formation of Islamic Morality

Essentialism, as explained by Astuti et al, is a school of philosophy that urges society to return to the cultural values of the past, especially those tested over time and seen as beneficial for humanity. This philosophy finds its inspiration in the civilizations of the Renaissance, which sought to revive classical science, arts, and culture from ancient Greek

and Roman times. According to Brameld, Essentialism is rooted in a blend of Idealism and Realism, creating a solid philosophical foundation for education (Astuti et al., 2023).

Supriadi et al., emphasized that an education system lacking stable value foundations risks becoming uncertain, directionless, and inconsistent. Therefore, Essentialism focuses on transferring essential knowledge and values, which are believed to ensure cultural continuity and the survival of civilization across generations (Supriadi et al., 2024).

In the essentialist framework, the core purpose of education is to transmit these essential values, tested by time, which serve as a guide for life. Schools, therefore, are responsible for teaching fundamental skills such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and logical reasoning. Students are not seen as innately good or bad, but as individuals in need of guidance, discipline, and moral education to become responsible members of society. Teachers hold an authoritative position, tasked with shaping students' characters, curbing unproductive tendencies, and cultivating intellectual and ethical strength. Education, from this view, should focus on clear, practical instruction, not on influencing social policy or ideological debate.

Reconstructionism as a Pillar of Innovation in Islamic Education

In contrast, Reconstructionism is a school of thought that aspires to reshape the social order through educational reform, with a vision of modernizing cultural life and fostering a global community based on justice and equity (Sutrisno et al., 2025). Sutrisno et al., argued that education must equip students to rise and adapt to the dynamics of societal change brought by scientific and technological advancement (Sutrisno et al., 2024).

George Counts and Harold Rugg, two pioneers of Reconstructionism, believed education should play a central role in social change, serving as an agent of transformation to address inequality and promote justice. Counts, in particular, questioned the social and economic disparities perpetuated by the education system and advocated for schools to build a new social order (Allo, 2024). Reconstructionism also connects with Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes student-centered learning, critical engagement, and the active construction of knowledge (Brooks, 1993). In this paradigm, the role of teachers is not to transfer knowledge directly but to facilitate students' learning processes, guiding them as they build their understanding and develop the ability to address real-world challenges.

Islamic thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal also advanced ideas aligned with Reconstructionism, asserting that education must lead to the creation of a *kamil* (complete) human being, who balances intellectual, spiritual, and ethical development. Education, in this sense, is seen as a process of nurturing individuals who will actively participate in shaping a just and progressive society while remaining rooted in Islamic principles (Sari, 2020).

The Integrative Model: A Middle Path in Philosophical Tensions

Philosophically, Islamic education is deeply linked to the values embedded in the Qur'an and Hadith, and must be both spiritually and intellectually transformative. Tobroni introduced the concept of the "spiritualization of education," which emphasizes human wholeness and the importance of integrating divine values into the learning

process. Reconstructionism challenges Islamic education to not only maintain its religious identity but also to evolve and address global social problems, by incorporating social sciences, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary inquiry into its curriculum. At the same time, Essentialism ensures that these engagements are anchored in time-tested moral and ethical frameworks, preventing the relativism that might arise from unrestricted adaptation (Aristiyasari, 2019). Despite their contrasting approaches, both Essentialism and Reconstructionism offer complementary insights. Essentialism provides stability and continuity, while Reconstructionism injects relevance and adaptability. Both, if integrated thoughtfully, can serve as the foundation of a balanced Islamic educational philosophy.

Practical Implications for Contemporary Islamic Education

Despite their philosophical richness, both Essentialism and Reconstructionism present challenges for practical implementation. Essentialism, with its commitment to stability, may struggle to adapt to the fast pace of modern scientific and social development. Its strong attachment to tradition can sometimes make it less responsive to the evolving needs of students, especially in the globalized world. Conversely, Reconstructionism's flexibility and openness to change can result in relativism, potentially obscuring the fundamental teachings of Islam. Furthermore, it faces resistance from conservative circles concerned about the dilution of Islamic values in the name of reform and progress.

Nonetheless, these two philosophies offer valuable opportunities for Islamic education. Essentialism, with its emphasis on core values and moral education, provides a strong foundation for nurturing students with sound character and ethical principles, ensuring that Islamic teachings are preserved and passed down clearly and systematically. This structured approach also contributes to the development of highly qualified human resources, not only intellectually but also morally (Oktaviani et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Reconstructionism offers a dynamic vision for curriculum renewal, enabling Islamic education to integrate contemporary knowledge and respond to global changes. This approach encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, fostering a generation of Muslims ready to face the challenges of modern life without losing sight of their religious identity. In essence, the synergy between Essentialism and Reconstructionism opens the path for Islamic education to remain relevant, capable of producing a generation of Muslims who are morally grounded, intellectually competent, and socially responsive.

E. Conclusion

This research concludes that the philosophical thoughts of Essentialism and Reconstructionism offer a complementary framework for developing Islamic education in facing contemporary global challenges. Essentialism emphasizes value stability and structured learning as the foundation for shaping students' moral character, while Reconstructionism promotes critical thinking, social responsiveness, and curriculum adaptation in addressing modern issues. The integration of both philosophies enables Islamic education to balance the preservation of Islamic identity with the flexibility needed

to respond to scientific, technological, and cultural changes. The synthesis of these approaches shows that Islamic education must be both rooted in tradition and responsive to global dynamics. Additionally, educational leadership is essential in ensuring that Islamic values remain central while encouraging innovation. Future research should focus on implementing integrative educational models that prepare learners for modern complexities while maintaining their spiritual integrity.

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