

HUMANISTIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: IMPLEMENTING A PEDAGOGY OF LOVE IN THE CURRICULUM FOR INDONESIA'S YOUNG GENERATION

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Abstract

Religious education holds a strategic role in shaping young generations who are religious, ethical, and humanistic. However, the reality of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia is still dominated by cognitive–doctrinal transmission, leading students to become passive recipients with limited opportunities for critical reflection, empathy, and lived moral experience. This condition demonstrates the need for a paradigmatic shift toward a more liberating, dialogical, and human-centered educational model. This article aims to describe the concept of humanistic religious education by positioning Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Love as its philosophical and methodological foundation, and to explain its relevance for curriculum development in Indonesian Islamic education. This research uses a literature review with thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that a Pedagogy of Love serves as a transformative framework that promotes dialogue, empathy, egalitarian teacher–student relations, and critical awareness. It shifts religious education beyond cognitive transfer toward affective–moral formation and social responsibility. Therefore, a Pedagogy of Love-based humanistic approach is essential for strengthening Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. Future research is recommended to develop operational implementation models so this pedagogical concept can be applied concretely in classroom and madrasah settings.

Keywords: Humanistic Religious Education, Pedagogy of Love, Islamic Curriculum, Humanizing Pedagogy, Character Formation

Pendidikan Agama Humanistik: Menerapkan Pedagogi Cinta dalam Kurikulum Untuk Generasi Muda Indonesia

Abstrak

Pendidikan agama memiliki peran strategis dalam membentuk generasi muda yang religius serta berkarakter humanis. Namun realitas menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran agama masih didominasi pendekatan kognitif-doktrinal sehingga peserta didik cenderung pasif dan kurang memiliki ruang untuk refleksi kritis, empati, serta pengalaman nilai secara nyata. Kondisi ini menandakan perlunya paradigma baru pembelajaran agama Islam yang lebih membebaskan, dialogis, dan berorientasi kemanusiaan. Artikel ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan konsep pendidikan agama humanistik dengan menempatkan Pedagogy of Love Paulo Freire sebagai fondasi filosofis-metodologis, serta menjelaskan relevansinya bagi pengembangan kurikulum dan praktik pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam di Indonesia. Metode yang digunakan adalah literature review dengan pendekatan analisis tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pedagogi cinta dapat berperan sebagai kerangka transformasi pendidikan yang menekankan dialog, empati, relasi setara, dan kesadaran kritis. Model ini mengarahkan pembelajaran agama tidak hanya pada transfer pengetahuan, tetapi juga penumbuhan karakter, kepekaan sosial, dan nilai kemanusiaan. Dengan demikian, pedagogi cinta memiliki urgensi strategis sebagai dasar penguatan kurikulum PAI yang lebih humanistik. Penelitian lanjutan disarankan untuk merancang model implementasi aplikatif agar konsep ini dapat diterapkan secara nyata dalam konteks sekolah dan madrasah.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Agama Humanistik, Pedagogy of Love, Kurikulum PAI, Humanisme, Karakter Peserta Didik

1. Introduction

Religious education holds a strategic role in shaping young generations to be religious, morally upright, and humanistic in character. Ideally, religious education should not merely function as a process of transferring religious knowledge, but also as a means of character formation, moral awareness, and the ability to coexist harmoniously within a plural society. A proper religious education should cultivate critical consciousness, empathy, and social responsibility so that learners do not only become believers, but also civilized individuals. In this framework, religious education is expected to serve as a medium of human liberation, rather than an instrument of doctrinal imposition. This aligns with the view of Anwar and Surawan (2025), who emphasize that humanistic and moderate Islamic theology is essential in building a pluralistic, just, and dignified society.

However, the current reality of religious education in Indonesia has not yet fully achieved these ideals. Learning practices are still dominated by cognitive–doctrinal approaches, where teachers serve as the central authority while students remain passive recipients of information. Such a pattern reflects the banking system of education criticized by Freire (2008), which prioritizes memorization and doctrinal transfer over dialogue and critical awareness. As a result, religious education tends to stagnate within the cognitive-formalistic domain and has not yet activated the humanistic dimension and meaningful religious experience of learners.

This gap becomes increasingly apparent through social phenomena such as rising intolerance, declining empathy, moral degradation, and the weakening of humanitarian sensitivity among younger generations. These issues indicate that religious education has not sufficiently addressed contemporary moral–social challenges and has not fully fulfilled its transformative function. Therefore, a paradigmatic shift is needed so that religious education moves beyond dogmatic transmission toward emancipatory, reflective, contextual, and dialogical learning.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of humanistic approaches within religious education. Susanti, Marsidin, and Karneli (2024) found that religious instruction remains normative and has not reached the affective dimension of learners. Hadid, Chasanah, and Khuriyah (2025) also emphasize the necessity of shifting the Islamic Religious Education curriculum from dogmatic to humanistic orientation. Astutik (2024) noted that Freirean critical pedagogy aligns with the Merdeka Belajar framework which encourages active student participation. Meanwhile, Zulkarnain, Surawan, and Wahidah (2022) demonstrated that creative media such as animated films can facilitate the internalization of humanitarian values. However, these studies have not specifically explored how Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Love could serve as a philosophical and methodological basis for developing a humanistic religious education curriculum in Indonesia.

This is where the novelty of the present research lies. Rather than discussing Freire’s critique generally, this article positions the Pedagogy of Love as the epistemological and methodological core of religious education. Love is viewed not merely as emotional morality, but as a transformative force that nurtures dialogue, empathy, human dignity, and egalitarian teacher–student relations. Thus, this study contributes a new conceptual perspective for reconstructing religious education through transformative humanism.

Based on the background and research gap discussed above, this study formulates the following research problems:

- 1) How can humanistic religious education be conceptualized when positioned within Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Love?
- 2) How is the Pedagogy of Love relevant to classroom practice and curriculum development in Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia?

Accordingly, this study aims to:

- 1) Describe the concept of humanistic religious education by positioning Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Love as a philosophical–methodological foundation; and
- 2) Explain the relevance of applying the Pedagogy of Love in classroom practice and curriculum development within Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia.

In conclusion, this study is expected to provide conceptual contributions that reinforce the development of a more humanistic, reflective, contextual, and humanitarian-oriented Islamic Religious Education curriculum — serving as a foundation for dialogical and liberating learning in the modern era. The following section elaborates the research method used.

2. Research Method

2.1. Type of Research

This study employs a literature review approach with a conceptual and analytical orientation toward Paulo Freire's ideas, specifically his Pedagogy of Love and its relevance to Islamic religious education in Indonesia. This method is appropriate because the objective of the study is theoretical—developing a conceptual foundation rather than collecting empirical field data. Thus, the analysis relies entirely on academic publications and documented research findings. The review process follows the structured flow proposed by Machi and McEvoy (2022).

2.2. Data Sources

The data consist of primary and secondary literature, including Paulo Freire's original works, peer-reviewed journal articles, seminar proceedings, and relevant studies on religious education, critical pedagogy, and humanistic approaches. The inclusion criteria were:

- 1) discusses Paulo Freire's pedagogical thought,
- 2) relates to Islamic religious education, humanism, or critical pedagogy, and
- 3) published within the last ten years, except foundational Freire texts used as theoretical anchors.

These criteria ensured theoretical diversity and strengthened the reliability of the conceptual synthesis.

A total of 87 records were identified during the initial database search.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using document-based search and screening techniques. Literature exploration was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, and ResearchGate with keywords including Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Love, humanistic Islamic education, critical pedagogy, and education liberation.

The selection process followed three main stages:

- 1) Initial identification of relevant articles from keywords and database indexing,
- 2) Screening based on titles, abstracts, and publication credibility,
- 3) Eligibility assessment based on thematic contribution to the study.

During this process, 53 articles were excluded for reasons including irrelevant topics ($n = 25$), inappropriate research methods ($n = 15$), and lack of key conceptual criteria ($n = 13$). After screening, 32 articles met all eligibility requirements and were included in the final review.

The complete selection procedure is illustrated in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Figure 1).

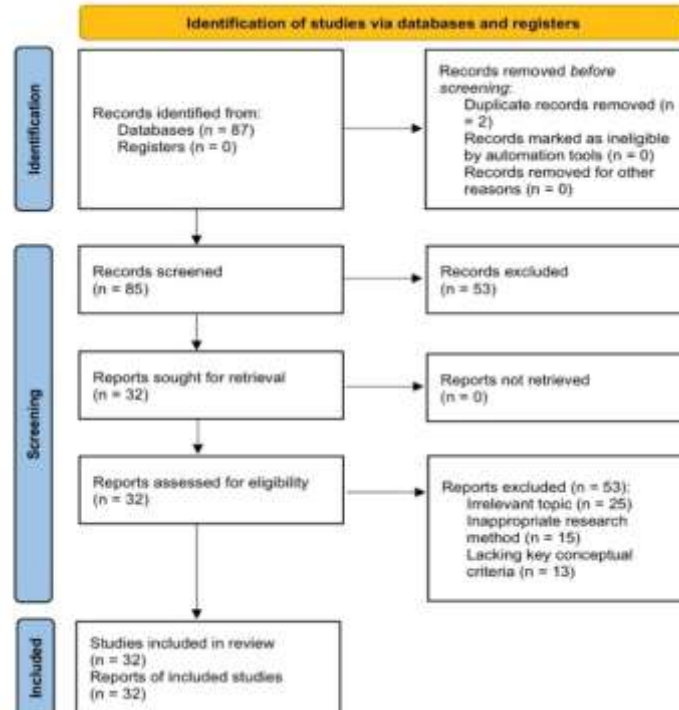


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis based on Krippendorff (2004). The analytical stages included:

- 1) Literature Collection — identifying potential sources from databases and repositories,
- 2) Screening and Categorization — sorting literature by relevance, theoretical alignment, and connection to Freirean pedagogy,
- 3) Thematic Coding and Interpretation — identifying major conceptual clusters such as the banking model of education, humanistic religious education, and the Pedagogy of Love,
- 4) Synthesis and Conceptual Construction — developing an integrated framework for humanistic Islamic religious education informed by Freire’s Pedagogy of Love.

This method ensures a rigorous, transparent, and systematic review process leading to a theoretically grounded model of humanistic religious education.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Humanistic Religious Education as a Foundational Framework

The literature review shows that Islamic religious education in Indonesia remains dominated by cognitive–doctrinal instruction, positioning teachers as authoritative sources and students as passive recipients. This condition reflects Freire’s (2008) critique of the banking model, which limits opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and transformative learning. Such practices contribute to declining empathy, intolerance, and weakened humanitarian sensitivity among students, as highlighted by Hermawan (2022), Bahri & Rizquha (2023), and Nur’aeni et al. (2024).

These findings reinforce the urgency of repositioning religious education toward humanistic principles that foster empathy, critical awareness, and social responsibility. Scholars such as Abdillah & Rofiq (2022), Anabalón Schaaf (2022), and Anwar & Surawan (2025) emphasize humanistic–pluralist Islamic education as essential for building harmonious societies. Empirical studies (Fadli, 2020; Fahira et al., 2025; Handayani & Hamami, 2022) further show that a humanistic PAI curriculum positively influences character formation, social sensitivity, and moral behavior.

Humanistic education also aligns with contemporary frameworks such as Merdeka Belajar (Astutik, 2024; Destri, 2025), which call for participatory, contextual, and learner-centered approaches. This direction resonates with Freire’s Pedagogy of Love, which frames liberation through dialogue, empathy, and egalitarian teacher–student relations. Therefore, a humanistic paradigm supported by the Pedagogy of Love provides a strategic foundation for strengthening the relevance and transformative function of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia.

To prevent readers from being overwhelmed by lengthy narratives, the key themes of humanistic religious education are summarized in the following table 1:

Table 1. Key Themes in Humanistic Religious Education

Theme	Description	Supporting Reference
Cognitive–Doctrinal Dominance	Learning dominated by memorization and teacher authority; students positioned as passive recipients.	Freire (2008); Hermawan (2022); Bahri & Rizquha (2023)
Weak Affective Development	Empathy, moral experience, and social sensitivity remain low in conventional PAI learning.	Nur’aeni et al. (2024); Hermawan (2022)
Need for Humanistic–Pluralist Education	Emphasizes dignity, tolerance, dialogue, and empathy as core educational values.	Abdillah & Rofiq (2022); Anabalón Schaaf (2022); Anwar & Surawan (2025)
Positive Impact of Humanistic Curriculum	Strengthens moral behavior, empathy, and social responsibility.	Fahira et al. (2025); Handayani & Hamami (2022); Rohim et al. (2023)
Alignment with Merdeka Belajar	Encourages contextual, participatory, reflective approaches to religious learning.	Astutik (2024); Destri (2025)

3.2. *Education Beyond Cognition: Affective-Humanistic Formation (Empathy & Tolerance)*

Freire argues that authentic education must be grounded in love—understood not as sentimentality but as an epistemological and methodological principle that sustains equality, dialogue, and liberation. Within this framework, the Pedagogy of Love offers a critical alternative to doctrinal, memorization-based religious instruction and positions learning as a humanizing encounter that affirms students’ dignity and agency. To clarify the foundational dimensions of Freire’s Pedagogy of Love, the core principles can be summarized in the following conceptual model on table 2:

Table 2. Core Principles of the Pedagogy of Love (Freire)

Principle	Description	Implication for PAI
Dialogue	Egalitarian communication valuing students' voices.	Facilitates critical reflection and collaborative meaning-making in PAI classes.
Empathy	Recognizing students’ dignity and lived experiences.	Strengthens affective–moral formation and humanistic character.
Humanization	Education that affirms learner identity and agency.	Moves PAI beyond doctrinal transfer toward personal transformation.
Critical Consciousness	Awareness of moral, social, and structural realities.	Encourages connecting Islamic values with real-life ethical responsibilities.
Liberative Praxis	Action rooted in justice, compassion, and reflection.	Shapes ethical, empathetic, socially responsible Muslim learners.

Recent literature affirms the transformative potential of the Pedagogy of Love. Molina (2024) conceptualizes it as a humanizing educational framework; Chen (2023) demonstrates its contribution to teacher well-being; and Daaboul (2024) highlights its role in creating emotionally secure learning environments. Zhao & Li (2021) show increased student engagement under love-centered pedagogical practices, while Anabalón Schaaf (2022) notes its strengthening effect on teacher identity and dignity.

In the Indonesian context, the Pedagogy of Love nurtures compassion (Sianipar & Telaumbanua, 2022), supports joyful and non-oppressive religious learning (Mubarak, 2025), and enhances critical–reflective thinking (Hadid et al., 2025; Khumaeni et al., 2022). Humanistic and dialogical approaches (Kim et al., 2023; Peercy et al., 2022) also contribute to improved moral awareness and social sensitivity. Collectively, these findings position the Pedagogy of Love as a foundational force for shaping empathetic, tolerant, and ethically responsible Muslim learners.

Novelty of the Study

The novelty of this study lies in positioning the Pedagogy of Love not merely as a moral sentiment but as a comprehensive epistemological–methodological framework for reconstructing Islamic Religious Education. While previous research treated humanistic and critical pedagogies separately, this article synthesizes Freire’s dialogical, humanizing, and emancipatory principles into a unified model that directly addresses issues such as intolerance, empathy decline, and rigid doctrinal learning. This formulation represents a theoretical development not yet articulated clearly in earlier literature.

4. Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed, Islamic religious education in Indonesia still encounters fundamental challenges at the level of practice. Learning remains dominated by doctrinal and memorization-oriented approaches, placing students as passive recipients and limiting opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and transformative understanding. This confirms Freire’s critique of the banking model of education, which reinforces knowledge transfer rather than fostering liberative consciousness, empathy, or lived moral experience. Consequently, the essential mission of religious education—to build individuals who are ethical, empathetic, tolerant, and socially responsible—has not yet been optimally accomplished, as reflected in rising intolerance, weakening empathy, and moral degradation among younger generations.

In this context, the Pedagogy of Love offers a substantial alternative framework. Love, as conceptualized by Freire, is not merely emotional sentiment but a philosophical–methodological basis for constructing humanizing, dialogic, and liberative education. The reviewed findings consistently indicate that Pedagogy of Love strengthens emotional engagement, supports dialogical learning, encourages critical

awareness, and nurtures compassion and social responsibility in students. Applied within Islamic Religious Education, this framework emphasizes reflective dialogue, value-based formation, collaborative meaning-making, and relational trust between teachers and learners—shaping education not only as knowledge transmission but as moral–humanistic transformation.

Therefore, humanistic religious education built upon love has strategic relevance for Indonesia's future. It provides a conceptual foundation to shift Islamic Religious Education beyond ritual competence toward compassionate spiritual formation, where students not only understand but also internalize and live religious values within social reality. Future studies are recommended to develop more operational models religious education grounded in the Pedagogy of Love—whether through classroom design, curriculum mapping, assessment frameworks, or community-based value education—so that the Pedagogy of Love moves beyond theoretical discourse and becomes a transformative pedagogical practice capable of shaping a dignified and humane young Muslim generation. The originality of this study lies in synthesizing Freire's Pedagogy of Love into a unified conceptual framework specifically tailored to reconstruct Islamic Religious Education in the Indonesian context. The originality of this study lies in synthesizing Freire's Pedagogy of Love into a unified conceptual framework specifically tailored to reconstruct Islamic Religious Education in the Indonesian context.

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