

# Critical Analysis of Islamic Educational Philosophy on the Concept of Essentialist Education

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## ABSTRACT

**This study aims to** critically analyze the concept of essentialist education from the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy, particularly in relation to educational goals, curriculum, the role of educators, and student orientation. **Using a descriptive qualitative approach** with a library research method, this study examines various literature such as books, journals, and scholarly works related to educational philosophy and the essentialist school of thought. **The findings** show that essentialism emphasizes the mastery of fundamental disciplines, long-standing cultural values, and the authoritative role of teachers in the learning process. Islamic perspectives share common ground with essentialism in terms of discipline formation, knowledge transmission, and character development, yet differ in the need to provide a more balanced space for student participation and potential development. **This study concludes** that essentialism can contribute to the development of Islamic education when adapted contextually, while maintaining a balance between teacher authority, modern curricular needs, and the spiritual as well as intellectual growth of learners.

**Keywords:** Islamic Educational Philosophy, Esensialist Education, Critical Analysis

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan* untuk menganalisis secara kritis konsep pendidikan esensialisme dari perspektif filsafat pendidikan Islam, khususnya dalam kaitannya dengan tujuan, kurikulum, peran pendidik, dan orientasi peserta didik. Melalui pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan **metode studi kepustakaan**, penelitian ini menelaah berbagai literatur seperti buku, jurnal, dan karya ilmiah terkait filsafat pendidikan dan aliran esensialisme. **Hasil penelitian** menunjukkan bahwa esensialisme menekankan pentingnya penguasaan disiplin ilmu dasar, nilai-nilai budaya yang telah teruji, serta peran guru sebagai figur otoritatif dalam pembelajaran. Perspektif Islam memiliki titik temu dengan esensialisme dalam aspek penanaman disiplin, pewarisan ilmu, dan pembentukan karakter, namun berbeda dalam hal kebutuhan untuk memberikan ruang yang lebih seimbang bagi partisipasi dan pengembangan potensi peserta didik. **Studi ini menegaskan** bahwa esensialisme dapat memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan pendidikan Islam

*apabila diadaptasi secara kontekstual, dengan tetap menjaga keseimbangan antara otoritas pendidik, kebutuhan kurikulum modern, dan perkembangan spiritual serta intelektual peserta didik.*

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**Kata Kunci:** *Filosofi Pendidikan Islam, Pendidikan Esensial, Analisis Kritis*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the development of education, one branch of science has held a crucial position and continues to receive significant scholarly attention, particularly in higher education: the philosophy of education. This field functions as an effort to address fundamental questions that emerge in both educational theory and practice. It explores not only technical or procedural matters, but also examines deeper issues concerning the nature of humankind, the aims of education, the values that underpin it, and the direction an educational system intends to pursue (Salminawati, 2011). Essentially, the philosophy of education applies philosophical analysis to education by using philosophical principles and modes of thinking to study, evaluate, and formulate the rationale behind every educational activity. Thus, it serves not merely as a set of theories, but as a conceptual framework that provides meaning, direction, and purpose for the entire educational process. Although the philosophy of education has been widely discussed, previous studies often focus on general theoretical frameworks without linking them to contemporary educational challenges or practical implications in specific learning environments. The lack of explicit analysis connecting philosophical foundations to current educational needs has left a gap that requires further exploration.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how philosophical perspectives can be more concretely aligned with present-day educational practices, particularly in designing learning approaches that are relevant to modern academic settings.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to integrate classical philosophical foundations with current educational demands, offering a fresh conceptual linkage that has not been explicitly articulated in prior research.

Furthermore, the philosophy of education also encompasses the philosophical values and beliefs that inspire, underlie, and provide a specific identity or characteristic to an educational system. These values then shape the vision, mission, and educational orientation of a nation or institution, ensuring that education does not proceed mechanically but is based on a solid moral, ethical, and rational foundation.

Therefore, someone who practices philosophy in the field of education is required to possess the ability to think critically, idealistically, logically, coherently, comprehensively, and deeply. This way of thinking is essential for the development of educational thought oriented toward wisdom and truth, rather than merely short-term practical interests. Through philosophy, an educator or educational scientist is expected to understand education as a complex, value-laden, and evolving human process that continually evolves with the changing times.

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According to Brameld, the development of educational philosophy can be understood through the schools of thought, including progressivism, essentialism, perennialism, and reconstructionism. Within these four schools, there are still common elements, allowing for overlapping between schools. Therefore, it is difficult to identify dichotomous and contradictory differences between schools (Muhammad Anwar, 2014). A philosopher has demonstrated the techniques of philosophical science, but all have their own weaknesses, just as the techniques of philosophical science are subject to criticism or revision by a philosopher. Because philosophical schools of thought will generally exist, just like the schools of thought that preceded them.

Regarding the philosophy of Islamic Education, there is a definition put forward by an Islamic figure, namely Omar Muhammad al-Taomy al-Syaibany in the book *Zainudin*, stating that the philosophy of Islamic Education is nothing other than the implementation of philosophical views and the rules of Islamic philosophy in the field of Education based on Islamic teachings. Moreover, in order for the philosophy of Islamic Education to obtain the benefits, goals and functions expected, philosophy must be taken from various sources. Another opinion regarding the philosophy of Islamic Education, namely Mujayyin Arifin, said that the concept of thinking about education based on Islamic teachings about the nature of human abilities to be fostered and developed and guided to become Muslim humans whose entire personality is imbued with Islamic teachings (Zainudin, 2010).

Of the four schools of educational philosophy known in the modern educational treasury namely, progressivism, essentialism, perennialism, and reconstructionism this scientific article will specifically focus on the essentialist school of thought. This school of thought was chosen because it has had a significant influence on the development of educational theory and practice, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of mastering basic, essential knowledge for students (Suyono, 2011). Essentialism views that education must be oriented towards preserving fundamental values and the intellectual heritage of the past which are considered important for forming the character, discipline of thought, and intellectual abilities of students (Arifin, 2014).

In the context of studying the philosophy of Islamic education, essentialism is interesting to critically examine because it has both common ground and differences with Islamic educational principles. Islamic educational philosophy positions knowledge as a means to draw closer to God and to develop a perfect human being, while essentialism places greater emphasis on developing rational, disciplined, and knowledgeable individuals. Therefore, discussing essentialism from the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy offers an opportunity to find a synthesis between spiritual and rational values that can enrich the concept of Islamic education itself (Arifin, 2014)

Through this discussion, the author attempts to outline how key concepts within the essentialist school—such as the importance of the core curriculum, the role of teachers as intellectual authorities, and the emphasis on mastery of basic knowledge—can be critiqued, analyzed, and adapted within the framework of Islamic educational philosophy. This study is expected to provide

a conceptual contribution to the development of Islamic educational theory that is more relevant, contextual, and oriented toward a balance between the intellectual and spiritual aspects of students (Zuhairini, 2010).

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a library research design, in which the author collected and examined books and other scholarly works relevant to the research focus. The research was carried out through systematic reviewing, reading, and analyzing of various sources such as articles, journals, theses, and reference books related to the philosophy of Islamic education. While the object of this study centers on the philosophy of Islamic Education, the research subjects are represented by the concepts, arguments, and perspectives found within the selected literature. To analyze the data, content analysis was applied. However, because the study is positioned as a critical analysis, several methodological steps were incorporated to strengthen evaluative rigor. These include identifying key philosophical concepts within the literature, comparing differing viewpoints across sources, and conducting a critical evaluation of their relevance, coherence, and implications for contemporary educational practice. Through these stages conceptual identification, comparative examination, and evaluative interpretation the study ensures that its analytical process is methodologically sound and aligned with the standards of critical inquiry (Moleong, 2013).

Once the data is collected, the next step is to organize it and then analyze it. There are three ways to analyze data: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Sugiyono, 2010).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Concept and Definition of Essentialism Philosophy from an Educational Perspective

Etymologically, essentialism comes from the English word essential, meaning the core or principle of something, and ism, meaning a school of thought, school of thought, or ideology. Essentialism is a vague term encompassing the study of essence, that is, what makes something what it is, as opposed to contingency, that is, something merely coincidental, the absence of which would not negate it. Essentialism has different meanings in biology and philosophy. In biology, essentialism is the belief that animal and plant species differ from one another because of their essence, which means recognizing the existence of nature. Meanwhile, in philosophy, "essentialism" is a concept about humans that is the opposite of "existentialism." Essentialism aims to prioritize essence over existence. It does not assume that individuals are free to choose and determine, but rather individuals are considered the result of determinism that determines them and from which they cannot be separated. Essentialism revives the debate that opposes nature and culture (Muhammad Ichsan Thaib, 2015).

Essentialism is a blend of idealist and realist philosophical ideas. This school of thought would appear more solid and rich in ideas if it adopted only one school or position. The intersection of these two schools is eclectic, meaning both schools support each other, not merging into one or abandoning the identity and characteristics of each school (Muhammad Anwar, 2014).

Essentialism is a philosophical school that encourages humanity to return to ancient cultures. They believe that ancient cultures have provided many benefits for humanity. By ancient cultures, they mean those that have existed since the earliest human civilizations. However, they emphasize civilization since the Renaissance, which flourished and developed between the 11th and 14th centuries AD. During the Renaissance, efforts to preserve antiquity flourished, particularly in the ancient Greek and Roman eras (Praja, S. Juhaya, 2008).

Essentialism, similar to perennialism, holds that our culture possesses a core of common knowledge that should be imparted to students in schools in a systematic and disciplined manner. Unlike perennialism, which emphasizes external truths, essentialism emphasizes the underlying knowledge and skills that are believed to be important and necessary for productive members of society. Several books have been written complaining about the decline in the quality of school education in the United States and calling for an essentialist approach to school education. Among them are James D. Koerner's "The Case For Basic Education" (1959), H.G. Rickover's "Education and Freedom" (1959), and Paul Copperman's "The Literacy Hoax: The Decline of Reading, Writing, and Learning in the Public School and What We Can Do About It" (1978) (Uyoh Sadulloh, 2003).

The central idea of Essentialism is a modern theory—a product of the Renaissance. Replacing the absolutist governmental systems of ancient and medieval times, characterized by the undeniable, dogmatic authority of the church, modern Essentialist philosophy aims to develop a systematic, unifying concept of humanity and the universe appropriate to the needs of modern times and institutions (Abdul Aziz, et.al, 2006). Idealism and realism are philosophical schools that support essentialism. The contributions made by each are eclectic. This means that these two philosophical schools converge as supporters of essentialism, but they do not merge into one (they do not abandon their respective characteristics) (Jalaludin, et.,al, 1997). This makes Essentialism richer than if it had simply adopted a unilateral position from either school it synthesized.

Modern realism, one of the exponents of essentialism, focuses on nature and the physical world, while modern idealism, another exponent, focuses on spiritual views. John Butler distinguished the two: nature is the primary source of reality within itself, and serves as the basis for philosophy. There is something there that generates senses and perceptions that are not merely mental (Jalaludin, et., al, 1997).

Essentialism, which developed during the Renaissance, differs from Progressivism in its perspective on education and culture. While progressivism considers education to be flexible, open to change, unaffected by any particular doctrine, tolerant, and capable of changing and evolving values, essentialism believes that education based on a flexible perspective in all its forms can lead



to changing, unstable, unfocused, uncertain, and unstable views. Therefore, education must be based on values that can bring stability, are time-tested, durable, and clear and selective (Muhamad Anwar, 2014).

## 2. Implementation of the Essentialist Philosophy in the Field of Education

Education is a system that interconnects one aspect with another. These aspects include objectives, curriculum, educators, and students.

### 1) Educational Objectives

The goal of education in the essentialist school of thought is to convey cultural and historical heritage through time-honored knowledge, accompanied by skills, so that education can be known to everyone and remains unchanging. Not only skills, but also followed by the right attitudes and values, so that they can form the core (essential) elements of an education (Helaludin, 2018). Essentialist education also views that education must be based on values that have clarity and are long-lasting, so that they remain stable and the chosen values have a clear order. The general goal of essentialist philosophical education is to shape a happy person in this world and the hereafter. Therefore, the content of essentialist education includes science, art, and everything related to human will. And education must also be able to direct a learning effort that achieves academic standards and high intelligence development goals.

### 2) Curriculum

The curriculum is a miniature world that can be used as a benchmark for truth, reality, and usefulness. Therefore, in its historical development, the philosophy of essentialist education has implemented various curriculum patterns, including idealism and realism. Idealism in essentialist education is an effort to develop students' personalities in accordance with the truth derived from the Creator. Meanwhile, realism in essentialist education is interpreted as an effort to guide students in mastering knowledge (Afifudin Harisah, 2018).

Hilda Taba in the book *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* quoted by Toto Suharto defines the curriculum with the old paradigm as "a plan for learning; therefore, what is known about the learning process and the development of individuals has bearing on the shaping of a curriculum" (A lesson plan, which therefore what is known about the learning process and individual development has a relationship with the form of a curriculum). The curriculum in the narrow sense is indeed a learning plan that must be taken to achieve certain levels and goals (Toto Suharto, 2014). If the curriculum is understood in a narrow sense, the dynamics of the teaching and learning process and the creativity of educators will stop here, meaning that educators and students will stop at the lesson material that has been prepared and planned in the curriculum.

The curriculum according to essentialism is humanistic and international. Because the curriculum is based on the importance of effective personality development, which includes knowledge that must be mastered in life and is able to mobilize the desires of society. Therefore,

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in this case, the role of schools in providing education becomes more functional and effective in accordance with principles and social realities. The curriculum according to essentialism is also flexible and open to change, tolerant and has no connection to any particular doctrine (Rokhmatul Khoiro, et.al, 2023). Therefore, schools should compile their own curriculum that must be tailored to the abilities and development of students, because in essence, schools are institutions that maintain values that have been passed down from generation to generation and become guides for individual adjustment when mingling in society.

### 3) Educator

Educators are one of the essential components of education. In general, educators are those who bear significant responsibility in guiding learners toward the educational goals they aspire to achieve. Educators are mature individuals who, by virtue of their rights and obligations, carry out the educational process (Toto Suharto, 2014).

In the philosophy of essentialism, education is centered on the educator, or what is commonly referred to as the teacher. A teacher is someone who possesses and masters knowledge to a greater extent than their students. The teacher holds the highest position in the educational sphere; therefore, within the essentialist philosophy of education, the classroom is entirely under the influence and authority of the educator. The task of an educator is not only to master knowledge but also to equip themselves with the skills necessary to effectively deliver learning materials to their students. These skills enable teachers to stimulate greater interest in learning among students. Accordingly, the essentialist philosophy of education emphasizes the authority of the teacher in conveying the knowledge they possess, as well as the fundamental values embedded in the curriculum. Thus, the teacher becomes a central figure within essentialist education, serving as the primary agent in preserving and transmitting knowledge to students and future generations through culture and history, wisdom, and understanding (Almi Novita, 2021). Therefore, a teacher must be able to serve as a good role model both in learning activities and beyond, so that they may become a positive example for their students.

### 4) Student

In the Islamic educational paradigm, students are immature individuals with a basic potential (nature) that needs to be developed. Here, students are God's creatures, consisting of physical and spiritual aspects that have not yet reached maturity, whether physical, mental, intellectual, or psychological. Therefore, they constantly require the assistance, guidance, and direction of educators to optimally develop their potential and guide them towards maturity (Toto Suharto, 2014). Essentially, students are the focus of instruction through curriculum-based learning materials, receiving knowledge appropriate to their abilities and fostering positive behavior from their educators.

In the philosophy of essentialist education, the main focus in the learning process is to shape the intellectuality of students. Students are encouraged to be able to think clearly and

logically. In accordance with the goal of essentialist education, which is to want students to be able to master the basic disciplines of the subject of knowledge as an effort to solve various problems they face, both personal problems and those of the surrounding community. Therefore, the main goal of essentialist philosophy for students is to prepare students to live in society and be civilized (Almi Novita, 2021). In the author's view, students here are taught how to be social and think rationally, with the aim of training students to be accustomed to controlling their behavior in society with good and civilized behavior and to live in cooperation and mutual assistance.

The role of students is to learn, not to organize lessons. Teachers are required to master their subject matter, as they hold the highest position in education. This can be interpreted as meaning that the essentialist school of educational philosophy is rooted in modern expressions of objective realism and idealism, namely that the universe is governed by natural laws, so that humans' task is to understand natural laws in order to adapt to their management (Hamdi, Yusliani, 2023).

### 3. The Goals and Orientation of Education in the Essentialist Philosophy School

In the concept of essentialism, education aims to transmit cultural and historical heritage through accumulated core knowledge that has endured over time. This culture represents a way of life that has stood the test of time (Yunus, 2016). Furthermore, the goal of essentialist education is to prepare people for life. However, this does not mean schools are abdicating their responsibilities; rather, they contribute by designing subject areas in a way that ultimately meets students' needs to prepare them for life.

Specifically, essentialism is a form of vocational education that limits subject matter to students' needs for a productive life. This subject matter is free from speculation and debate, and is free from political and religious bias. In general, essentialism is a transmission model of education that aims to accustom students to living in today's society.

The basic concept of essentialist education is how to develop and implement essentialist programs in schools. The main objectives of these programs include: 1) Essentialist schools train and educate students to communicate logically. 2) Schools actively teach and train children in the values of discipline, hard work, and respect for authority. 3) Schools program practical education and provide children with instruction that prepares them for life.

Based on this basic concept, the goals of essentialist education include:

- a) To transmit cultural and historical heritage through accumulated core knowledge that has endured over time and constitutes a lifelong tradition that has stood the test of time and is known to all. This knowledge includes adequate skills, attitudes, and values.
  - b) To prepare people for life. This preparation involves designing subject matter objectives so that the outcomes can prepare students for life in the future.
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In preparing these subjects, schools appear to be solely responsible for designing learning objectives; their implementation requires collaboration with external stakeholders. Therefore, essentialists reject the constructivist view, which holds that schools should be active institutions for social change, especially those responsible for the education of the entire younger generation (Ahmad Hidayat, 2008).

Based on the explanation above, it is understood that basically the aim of essentialist education is the transmission of culture to determine social solidarity and welfare.

#### 4. The Role of Educators from the Perspective of Essentialist Philosophy

Diane Lapp et al (1975) stated in Ahmad Hidayat that for essentialists, teachers should be active, responsible, room organizers, good knowledge providers, determiners of materials, methods, evaluations and be responsible for all areas of learning. Teachers are considered as someone who masters a specific subject area and is an excellent role model to be imitated and respected ((Ahmad Hidayat, 2008). Considering the essentialist view of the teacher's role above, a teacher should be educated. Morally, he or she should be someone who can be trusted. Technically, he or she should possess the skills to direct the teaching process.

According to Barnadib (1997), as quoted by H.A. Yunus, the role of the teacher is similar to perennialism. Teachers hold a more specialized role, where they are considered experts in their field and subject, and are good role models to be emulated. They are masters of knowledge and science. In formal education, the classroom is under the influence and supervision of the teacher (Yunus, 2016).

According to essentialist philosophy, teachers hold a strong and authoritative role in directing and supervising classroom activities. They are viewed as experts who guide learning and serve as models for values and intellectual mastery (Muhaimin, 2004; 2012). In this perspective, the teacher's position is far more dominant than that of the student, as students are expected to follow a structured curriculum grounded in established and enduring values. Several aspects of essentialism align with Islamic education, particularly the emphasis on disciplined learning, the central role of the teacher as a moral guide, and the transmission of foundational knowledge that shapes character and intellectual development. However, essentialism's tendency toward rigid teacher-centered instruction may not fully correspond with Islamic educational principles that encourage active engagement, balanced interaction, and the cultivation of students' potential through mutual respect. These points carry important pedagogical implications: teachers in Islamic education are expected not only to maintain authority and uphold core values but also to facilitate meaningful learning that nurtures students' abilities and spiritual growth. Highlighting these alignments and divergences supports the research objective of examining how philosophical perspectives, including essentialism, can inform contemporary Islamic educational practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that essentialist philosophy provides a structured and value oriented foundation for education through its emphasis on core knowledge, disciplined learning, and the authoritative role of teachers. The analysis in this article shows that essentialism aligns with several principles of Islamic education particularly in shaping disciplined character, transmitting enduring knowledge, and strengthening intellectual clarity while also revealing areas that require adaptation to contemporary learning needs.

A key synthesis emerging from the findings is that essentialism's strong teacher-centered orientation must be balanced with Islamic educational values that encourage active participation, moral cultivation, and the development of learners' potential. Therefore, essentialist principles cannot be applied rigidly; instead, they should be contextualized to support an educational environment that is both structured and humane.

From a practical standpoint, this study highlights several implications for educators and curriculum designers. Teachers are encouraged to maintain their role as guides and moral exemplars, yet at the same time foster learning interactions that allow students to reason, inquire, and connect knowledge to real-life situations. Curriculum developers, meanwhile, should integrate foundational disciplines with contemporary competencies such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and collaborative skills so that essentialist values remain relevant in modern Islamic educational settings.

In conclusion, essentialism remains a valuable philosophical reference for building an education system rooted in clarity, stability, and cultural continuity. However, its implementation must be adapted through an Islamic educational lens that promotes balanced authority, active engagement, and the holistic growth of students. This integrative approach enables essentialist principles to contribute meaningfully to current educational challenges while supporting the formation of knowledgeable, disciplined, and ethically grounded learners..

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