

The Role and Challenges of Buddhist Sunday Schools in Wonogiri Region : A Case Study of Non-Formal Buddhist Religious Education

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Abstract: This research examines the role and challenges of Buddhist Sunday Schools (SMB) as non-formal educational institutions in developing Buddhist religious education in the Wonogiri Region, Central Java. Through a qualitative approach with case study methods, this research explores the contribution of BSS to the spiritual development of Buddhist children and adolescents, as well as the obstacles faced in its implementation. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15 teachers, participatory observations in 5 viharas, and focus group discussions with 25 students and 10 parents. The results show that BSS plays an important role in: (1) instilling Buddhist values from an early age; (2) strengthening religious identity in a predominantly non-Buddhist environment; (3) building a supportive community for Buddhist families; and (4) complementing the limited Buddhist religious education in formal schools. The main challenges faced include: (1) limited trained human resources; (2) lack of contextual teaching materials; (3) limited financial support; and (4) difficulty in maintaining the interest of students as they age. This research recommends the importance of developing an integrated curriculum, continuous training for teachers, utilizing digital technology in learning, and strengthening networks between Buddhist Sunday schools in the region

Keywords: Buddhist Sunday School, Minority communities, Non-formal education, Religious identity, Wonogiri

1. Introduction

Religious education is an important component in the formation of character and spiritual values of children and adolescents. In the context of religious pluralism in Indonesia, religious education not only plays a role in transmitting religious teachings and values, but also becomes a strategic instrument in building a strong religious identity for all religious adherents. In Indonesia, Buddhist religious education faces its own challenges, especially in areas such as Wonogiri Regency, Central Java, where the demographics have rich religious diversity.

Buddhism, as one of the officially recognized religions in Indonesia, has adherents of around 0.72% of the total population of Indonesia (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The distribution of Buddhist adherents is not evenly distributed geographically, with the highest concentrations in several regions such as West Kalimantan, Bangka Belitung, DKI Jakarta, and Riau. In Central Java, especially Wonogiri Regency, based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2022), Buddhist adherents reach around 1.8% of the total population. The existence of the Buddhist community in Wonogiri has formed a unique cultural identity and contributed to the socio-cultural diversity in the region.

Religious education in Indonesia has been formally regulated in Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which states that every student has the right to

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receive religious education according to the religion they adhere to. However, in practice, the implementation of this policy faces various obstacles in several regions. Limited resources, both in the form of qualified educators and contextual learning materials, are often obstacles in the implementation of Buddhist religious education in formal schools (Wijaya, 2018).

In response to these limitations, non-formal Buddhist religious education, such as the Buddhist Sunday School (SMB), is present as an alternative solution that plays a vital role in meeting the religious education needs of Buddhist children and adolescents. SMB not only functions as a complement to formal religious education but also as a center for spiritual development and the formation of a crucial religious identity (Dharmawati, 2021).

The concept of the Buddhist Sunday School itself is inspired by a similar religious education model in the Christian tradition that has succeeded in transmitting religious values to the younger generation through a more flexible and contextual non-formal education approach. In Indonesia, SMB has developed and adapted to local characteristics and the specific needs of the Indonesian Buddhist community. Sudhamma (2019) defines SMB as "Buddhist value learning activities that are carried out routinely, usually on Sundays or holidays, with a more interactive and enjoyable approach than formal education."

In Wonogiri Regency, the Buddhist community has succeeded in building and maintaining various religious institutions, including Buddhist Vihara and Sunday Schools, which have become centers of religious and educational activities. Data from the Central Statistics Agency of Wonogiri Regency (2022) shows that there has been an increase in the number of non-formal Buddhist religious educational institutions in this area in the last decade, reflecting the vitality and resilience of the local Buddhist community in maintaining and developing their religious traditions.

In Wonogiri Regency, there are several monasteries that actively organize Buddhist Sunday School programs, including Dhammasasana Monastery in Slogohimo District, Srada Kirti Monastery in Slogohimo District (whose SMB is integrated with Dhammasasana Monastery), Dhammasena Monastery in Wonogiri District, Vimala Kirti Monastery in Girimarto District, and Maitri Ratna Monastery in Giriwoyo District. Overall, the SMB program in the five monasteries serves around 93 students ranging from kindergarten to high school, showing the diversity of ages and developmental stages of students which is a challenge in organizing SMB.

Studies on non-formal Buddhist education in Indonesia are still relatively limited compared to studies on formal Buddhist education or studies on other religious education in general. Several previous studies have explored certain aspects of non-formal Buddhist education in various regions of Indonesia. Anggara (2019), for example, examined the effectiveness of the experiential learning method in Buddhist education for children in Yogyakarta, finding that the experiential learning approach significantly increased the understanding and internalization of Buddhist values. Kusuma (2022) examined the role of

Buddhist Sunday Schools in the formation of the religious identity of Buddhist children in various social environments in West Java, identifying that SMBs function as important cultural spaces in the construction and negotiation of identity. Dharmasurya (2021) explored the dynamics between tradition and modernity in non-formal Buddhist education in several areas of Central Java, highlighting the complexity of balancing the authenticity of tradition with contemporary needs.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into various aspects of non-formal Buddhist religious education, there has been no comprehensive study that specifically examines the dynamics, roles, and challenges of Buddhist Sunday Schools in the Wonogiri area. The uniqueness of Wonogiri's demographic, social, and cultural contexts makes the case of SMB in Wonogiri interesting to study as a model of how inclusive religious education can survive and thrive in a diverse community environment.

In a theoretical context, this study contributes to the discourse on religious education in a pluralistic society and the role of non-formal educational institutions in the formation of religious identity. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and intergroup interaction theory (Barth, 1969) are relevant conceptual frameworks in understanding how SMB plays a role in building and developing an understanding of Buddhism amidst the diversity of society. In addition, this study also contributes to the understanding of the adaptation and resilience of religious educational institutions in a multicultural society, a theme that is increasingly relevant in an increasingly plural and complex global society.

Practically, this study is expected to provide insights and recommendations for the development of SMB programs not only in Wonogiri but also in similar areas with similar demographic characteristics. By identifying best practices, challenges, and adaptation strategies, this study can be a reference for educational policy makers, religious leaders, and educational practitioners in improving the quality and sustainability of non-formal Buddhist religious education programs.

This study aims to: (1) identify the role of SMB in Buddhist religious education in Wonogiri; (2) analyze the challenges faced in organizing SMB; and (3) formulate development strategies to improve the effectiveness of SMB. Through a qualitative case study approach, this study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the context, dynamics, and complexity of SMB in Wonogiri, so that it can provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of non-formal Buddhist religious education, especially in areas with religious diversity such as Wonogiri .

2. Method

This research use approach qualitative with design studies case . Approach This chosen Because his ability For explore phenomenon in context natural and revealing complexity from various perspective (Creswell & Poth , 2018). Study design case allow researcher For to obtain

understanding deep about The role and challenges of SMB in Wonogiri as A specific and limited cases .

The research was conducted in 5 monasteries in the Regency Wonogiri which organizes the School program Buddhist Sunday in active: Dhammasasana Vihara (District) Slogohimo), Srada Kirti Vihara (Sub-district Slogohimo , SMB merged with Dhammasasana Vihara), Dhammasena Vihara (District Wonogiri), Vimala Kirti Vihara (District of Girimarto), and Maitri Ratna Vihara (District of Giriwoyo). Election location based on representation geographical and continuity of the SMB program that has been running for at least 5 years .

research subjects included 15 SMB teachers / mentors (3 people from each monastery), 25 SMB students from various group age (kindergarten to high school), 10 parents SMB students, and 5 Vihara administrators (1 person from each monastery). Election subject use purposive sampling technique based on criteria : (1) involvement active in SMB for at least 1 year ; (2) representation age and gender; and (3) willingness participate in research.

Data collected through interview in-depth , observation participatory , focus group discussion (FGD), and analysis Documents . Interview deep done with teachers, Vihara administrators, and parents For to obtain information about experience, perception, and view they about SMB. Observation participatory done with follow SMB activities for 2-3 meetings at each monastery for observing the learning process , interactions , and dynamics class . FGD was conducted with group students who are divided based on group age (kindergarten-elementary school, junior high school, and high school) for explore experience and views they about SMB. Document analysis includes curriculum, teaching materials, activity records, and other relevant documents.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the following stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, defining and naming themes, and report writing. To improve validity and reliability, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking with key informants.

3. Research Findings And Discussion

3.1. Profile of Buddhist Sunday School in Wonogiri

Based on the results of observation and document analysis, SMB in Wonogiri has relatively similar characteristics. The SMB program is generally held every Sunday morning for 2-3 hours, with participants varying from 7-39 students per monastery. The program structure includes chanting, short meditation, learning Buddhist materials, creative activities, and closing with reflection. The majority of teachers are monastery members who have diverse educational backgrounds, although a small number have formal Buddhist education qualifications.

Table 1. Brief Profile of Buddhist Sunday Schools in 5 Wonogiri Viharas

Name of the Vihara	Subdistrict	SMB Name	Amount Student	Range Age / Level
Dhamma	Slogohimo	Dhamma	34	Kindergarten-High School
The Holy Spirit	Slogohimo	Joined with Dhamma	-	-
Dhammasena	Wonogiri	Dhammasena	39	Kindergarten-High School
Vimala Kirti	The Great Martyr	Vimala Kirti	13	Kindergarten-High School
Maitri Ratna	Giriwoyo	Giriratana	7	Kindergarten-High School

Source : Research Data, 2024

From the table above , it can be seen that SMB at Dhammasena Vihara own amount student the most (39 students), followed by Vihara Dhammasasana (34 students). This is can associated with its location is in the center city Wonogiri and its surroundings are more easy accessed, as well as the program has a longer lifespan than other Viharas. While That is, the Maitri Ratna Vihara in the District Giriwoyo own amount least number of students (7 students), which may be reflect a larger Buddhist population small in the are.

As expressed by one of the teacher at Dhammasena Vihara :

"Our SMB has walk during almost 15 years , even though with amount fluctuating students . We divide them in three group age with different materials and approaches For every group . Challenge our biggest is maintain interest teenager For Keep going present in a way consistent ." (Interview , P1, January 15, 2024)

Temporary That , the teacher at the Maitri Ratna Vihara said :

" With amount limited students , we combine all group age in One class . This raises challenge alone in delivery material , but also creates dynamics positive where the child is more old Can help more young ." (Interview , P12, January 28, 2024)

Findings This show that SMB in Wonogiri has adapt with condition demographic and social culture local . Differences amount students , teachers , and program structure reflect response to needs and resources the power available in each monastery.

3.2. Role of Schools Buddhist Week in Wonogiri

Analysis results thematic identify four role SMB main in Wonogiri : planting Buddhist values since early , strengthening identity religious , development community supporters and complements formal religious education .

3.2.1. Instilling Buddhist Values from an Early Age

SMB plays a role important in introduce and instill fundamental Buddhist values such as the Buddhist Pancasila, the Noble Path of Dharma Eight , and the Jataka tales to children . Through interactive and fun approach , values abstract translated become understanding practical that can applied in life daily .

Findings This in line with Sudhamma's research (2019) which emphasizes importance approach fun and relevant learning in Buddhist religious education for children . Observation show that teacher use various method creative such as storytelling, role-playing, and games educative For introduce Buddhist concepts . This method proven effective in help children understand Buddhist values tend to abstract .

One parent said:

"My child is starting to understand the concepts of metta (loving-kindness) and karuna (compassion) from SMB, and it is reflected in his behavior at home and school. He is becoming more caring towards others and the environment." (Interview, OT3, January 21, 2024)

The results of FGD with children aged TK-SD also showed that they could explain Buddhist values such as love and compassion in simple language and relate them to examples of everyday behavior. This indicates the success of SMB in transforming abstract concepts into concrete understanding that is in accordance with the child's cognitive development stage.

3.2.2. Strengthening Religious Identity

In a region with a Buddhist minority like Wonogiri, SMB is an important space for children to build and strengthen their religious identity. Interaction with peers and mentors who share their beliefs provides a sense of belonging and togetherness.

This finding strengthens the results of Kusuma's (2022) research in West Java which found that SMB functions as a space for socialization and the formation of religious identity for Buddhist children living in a non-Buddhist majority environment. In Wonogiri, this situation is even more challenging given the smaller percentage of Buddhists compared to West Java.

A teenage student said:

"In formal schools, I often feel different because only a few are Buddhist. In SMB, I feel more comfortable because I can share experiences and learn more about my religion with friends who understand." (FGD, S11, February 4, 2024)

Observations during SMB activities also showed that children and adolescents displayed high levels of participation and involvement in religious activities such as chanting and meditation. This is in contrast to the findings of Bodhi (2020) who noted reluctance and passivity among Buddhist adolescents in similar activities in large urban contexts. This difference may be due to the strong sense of community among minority groups in Wonogiri.

3.2.3 Building a Supporting Community

SMB not only functions as an educational institution for children, but also as a meeting and interaction space for Buddhist families. Through the involvement of parents in various activities, SMB facilitates the formation of a social support network for Buddhist families in Wonogiri.

The administrator of the Vimala Kirti Vihara explained:

"SMB has become a kind of catalyst for bringing Buddhist families together. Parents who bring their children often engage in discussions and share experiences about the challenges of raising children with Buddhist values in a predominantly non-Buddhist environment." (Interview, PV4, February 11, 2024)

Observations show that some monasteries, especially Dhammasena Monastery and Dhammasasana Monastery, intentionally create companion programs for parents while their children attend SMB. These programs range from Dhamma discussions for adults to informal social activities that strengthen community ties. This approach creates what Wangchuk (2021) calls a "Buddhist educational ecosystem" where learning is not limited to children but involves the entire family.

3.2.4 Complementary Formal Religious Education

For students who receive Buddhist education in formal schools, SMB serves as enrichment and deepening. Meanwhile, for students who do not receive Buddhist education in schools (due to limited teachers or minimal number of Buddhist students), SMB becomes the only source of structured Buddhist education.

Based on data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Wonogiri Regency (2023), only 4 out of 12 junior high schools and 2 out of 6 senior high schools in Wonogiri have permanent Buddhist religious teachers. As a result, many Buddhist students do not receive religious education according to their beliefs in formal schools.

One of the teachers stated:

"Many of our students in formal schools do not receive Buddhist lessons because there are too few or no Buddhist teachers. SMB is the only place where they learn about their religion in depth and systematically." (Interview, P7, February 4, 2024)

Analysis of SMB curriculum documents in 5 monasteries shows that there are efforts to align the material with the national Buddhist religious education curriculum, while emphasizing aspects that are relevant to the local context. This finding is in line with the recommendations of the Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance (2020) for the development of a non-formal Buddhist religious education curriculum that is adaptive to local needs.

3.3. Challenges in Organizing Buddhist Sunday Schools

The study identified four main challenges in implementing SMB in Wonogiri: limited trained human resources, minimal contextual teaching materials, limited financial support, and difficulty maintaining student interest.

3.3.1 Limited Trained Human Resources

The majority of SMB teachers in Wonogiri are volunteers who do not have a specific educational background in Buddhist education. Of the 15 teachers interviewed, only 3 (20%) had a bachelor's degree in Buddhism, while the rest had diverse educational backgrounds.

One teacher admitted:

"I teach based on my experience and knowledge gained from reading and listening to the Dhamma, but I realize my limitations in effective teaching methods for children. Sometimes it is difficult to convey abstract concepts in a way that is easy to understand." (Interview, P10, February 18, 2024)

This situation is in line with the findings of Wijaya (2018) who identified limited human resources as one of the main challenges in Buddhist education in Indonesia, especially in areas with minority Buddhist populations. In Wonogiri, this challenge is exacerbated by the lack of access to nearby Buddhist higher education institutions that could be a source of training and development of teacher competencies.

3.3.2 Lack of Contextual Teaching Materials

The availability of contextual Buddhist teaching materials that are appropriate to the needs of today's children and adolescents is still limited. Analysis of teaching material documents in 5 monasteries shows that most of the materials are sourced from Buddhist religious education textbooks for formal schools or translations of English-language materials that are not always relevant to the socio-cultural context in Indonesia, especially Wonogiri.

The teacher from Maitri Ratna Vihara explains:

"We often have to modify or even create our own learning materials because the available materials are not always relevant to the local context or are too complex for children to understand. This requires extra time and creativity." (Interview, P5, January 28, 2024)

The limitations of contextual teaching materials have also been identified by Bodhi (2020) who noted the need to develop Buddhist educational materials that are responsive to technological developments and social change. In Wonogiri, this challenge is further complicated by the need for materials that are not only generally contextual but also relevant to the realities of life as a religious minority in the region.

3.3.3 Limited Financial Support

SMB in Wonogiri mostly operates with self-funding from the monastery and donations from the congregation. These financial limitations have an impact on the availability of facilities, teaching materials, and the ability to hold supporting activities such as retreats, educational visits, or teacher training.

The administrator of the Vimala Kirti Vihara said:

"The budget for SMB is very limited. We want to hold various interesting activities and buy teaching aids, but are always constrained by funds. Our teachers also teach voluntarily without honorarium." (Interview, PV3, February 4, 2024)

Financial data obtained from 3 monasteries show that the annual budget for the SMB program ranges from Rp 5-10 million per monastery, which includes the provision of teaching materials, meals, and special activities. This amount is relatively small compared to the ideal needs for a comprehensive non-formal education program.

3.3.4 Maintaining Student Interest

SMB faces challenges in maintaining student interest and participation, especially as they age. Attendance data from 5 Viharas show a consistent pattern where attendance tends to decline in the high school age group. At Dhammasena Vihara, for example, regular attendance for the kindergarten-elementary age group is 85%, while for the high school age group it is only around 60%.

A youth group teacher explains:

"It is very difficult to maintain the interest of teenagers to continue being active in SMB. They have many other activities and sometimes feel that SMB materials are less relevant to their lives as teenagers. We continue to try to make learning more interesting and relevant." (Interview, P12, February 25, 2024)

This challenge was also identified by Sucipto (2020) who noted the competition from various modern activities and distractions that attract the attention of children and adolescents. In Wonogiri, this situation is exacerbated by the limited choice of learning methods and materials that can attract the interest of adolescents in the context of religious learning.

3.4. Buddhist Sunday School Development Strategy

Based on the analysis of roles and challenges, this study identified several development strategies to improve the effectiveness of SMBs in Wonogiri.

3.4.1 Integrated Curriculum Development

The development of an integrated curriculum that integrates Buddhist values with contemporary issues relevant to the lives of children and adolescents in Wonogiri is a strategic step to increase the relevance of SMB. This curriculum needs to consider the stages of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development of students in various age groups.

One approach that can be adopted is the spiral curriculum model developed by Dharmawati (2021), where basic concepts are introduced at an age-appropriate level and then deepened gradually as students grow. This approach allows for continuity of learning as well as adaptation to different developmental needs.

3.4.2 Ongoing Training for Teachers

Regular training programs to improve the competence of teachers in aspects of Buddhist knowledge, learning methodology, and child development psychology are needed. Collaboration with Buddhist educational institutions such as Sekolah Tinggi Agama Buddhism (STAB) to provide training and mentoring can be a solution to the limited access to Buddhist higher education institutions in Wonogiri.

The training model recommended by Wangchuk (2021) includes a combination of intensive workshops, distance mentoring, and online communities of practice that allow teachers to continue developing their competencies without having to leave Wonogiri for long periods of time.

3.4.3 Utilization of Digital Technology

Integrating digital technology into learning can expand access to quality Buddhist educational resources and increase student engagement, especially among youth. The use of Buddhist educational apps, social media, and online learning platforms can complement face-to-face meetings and expand the reach of SMBs.

Sudhamma's (2022) findings show that a blended learning approach that integrates digital technology with face-to-face interactions can improve the effectiveness of Buddhist religious education, especially for adolescent groups. In Wonogiri, this approach can help overcome resource constraints and increase student engagement.

3.4.4 SMB Network Strengthening

Building and strengthening networks between Buddhist Sunday schools in Wonogiri and surrounding areas to share resources, experiences, and best practices can increase the collective capacity of SMB. Joint activities between Buddhist Sunday schools can also increase student motivation and strengthen a sense of togetherness.

This strategy is in line with Mahayana's (2020) recommendation on the importance of building a community of practice in the context of Buddhist education in minority areas. The SMB network can be a platform for sharing resources, developing joint materials, and organizing larger and more engaging activities that would not be possible for a single monastery due to resource constraints.

Field observations show that several initiatives for cooperation between Buddhist Sunday schools have begun, such as joint celebration of Buddhist holidays and Buddhist knowledge competitions between Buddhist Sunday schools. These initiatives need to be strengthened and formalized in the form of a district-level SMB forum or association.

3.4.5 Parent and Family Involvement

Developing programs that involve parents and families in the learning process can strengthen the effectiveness of SMB and create continuity of learning at home. Dewi (2023) emphasized that effective Buddhist religious education requires collaboration between formal, non-formal, and family educators.

Parent engagement programs can include Buddhist parenting classes, adult thematic discussions that run parallel to the SMB, and family activities that reinforce Buddhist values in daily life. This approach not only strengthens children's learning but also builds a broader ecosystem of support.

The caretaker of Dhammasena Vihara shares his experience:

"We hold discussion sessions for parents every two weeks, in conjunction with SMB activities. This helps parents understand what their children are learning and how to support their learning at home. As a result, children are more consistent in implementing Buddhist values because there is alignment between what is taught in SMB and at home." (Interview, PV1, February 10, 2024)

4. Conclusions

This research show that School Buddhist Week in Wonogiri Region play vital role in non-formal Buddhist religious education , especially in planting Buddhist values , strengthening identity religious, development community supporters and complements education formal religion. SMB becomes the more important in areas with population minority Buddhists like Wonogiri , because functioning No only as institution education but also as room For maintain and develop identity religious as well as build network support community.

Even though Thus , SMB in Wonogiri face various challenge like limitations source Power man trained, lack of contextual teaching materials , support financial limited , and difficulties maintain interest participant educate . Challenges This need approach strategic and systematic For overcome it , including development curriculum integrated , training sustainable for teacher , utilization digital technology, strengthening SMB networks , and parent and family involvement.

Based on research findings , some recommendation submitted For various stakeholders interests. For SMB managers and Vihara administrators , recommended For develop more curriculum contextual, organizing training periodic for teachers , take advantage of digital technology , and strengthen communication with parents students . For regional/ national level Buddhist organizations, recommended For provide help technical and financial for SMBs in minority areas , developing contextual teaching materials , facilitating training teachers , and build SMB network for share source Power .

This research also opens up opportunity For studies continuation of the study impact term SMB length to spiritual development and identity religious participant educate , develop and test learning models innovative , and do studies comparative about SMB practices in various regions with context sociocultural different.

With implementation of appropriate development strategies , Schools Buddhist Week in Wonogiri Region potential For Keep going grow and give contribution significant in non-formal Buddhist religious education in Indonesia.

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