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Review Article

The Importance of the Role of Buddhist Religious Extension Workers in Improving Buddhist Literacy

(Study through Meta Analysis of Journal Articles)

Wuryanti 1*

- Dharmaduta, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Buddha Negeri Raden Wijaya Wonogiri, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia; Yantiwuryanti849@gmail.com
- * Corresponding Author: Wuryanti

Abstract: Religious literacy plays a crucial role in fostering understanding and application of religious teachings in daily life. This study aims to analyze the role of Buddhist religious counselors in improving Buddhist literacy through a meta-analysis of scholarly articles. The research utilizes a qualitative meta-analysis approach by systematically reviewing 15 journal articles published between 2015-2024. Results show that Buddhist religious counselors serve multiple crucial functions: as knowledge transmitters of Buddhist teachings, facilitators of religious literacy programs, mediators between traditional teachings and contemporary needs, and agents of social transformation. Challenges include limited resources, geographical barriers, diverse educational backgrounds of adherents, and the need for innovative teaching methods. This research concludes that strengthening the role of Buddhist religious counselors requires systematic training programs, integration of digital literacy, and collaborative networks between religious institutions.

Keywords: Buddhist Literacy, Dharma Education, Meta-Analysis, Religious Counselors, Religious Guidance

1. Introduction

Literacy religious is ability For understand, interpret, and apply religious teachings in life everyday life. In the context of Buddhism, literacy religious No only covers ability read texts holy like the Tripitaka, but also the ability For reflect and implement Buddhist values in life everyday (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). Currently, the phenomenon decline literacy religious among Buddhists in Indonesia need get attention special (Sulaiman, 2021). According to data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religion (2020), of the 2.5 million Buddhists in Indonesia, only about 30% have understanding comprehensive about Buddhism. Conditions This bring up various challenge in the development of Buddhism in the middle plural society of Indonesia.

Buddhist religious instructors have position strategic as the vanguard in increase literacy religious Buddhists. According to Kusaladhamma (2020), Buddhist religious instructor plays a role as bridge connecting complex Buddhist teachings with understanding and practice daily people. This role become the more important remember diversity Buddhist traditions in Indonesia include Theravada, Mahayana, Tantrayana, and local Nikaya like Buddhayana (Setiawan, 2021). In addition, the development of technology information and digitalization also demands existence Updates in method Buddhist religious counseling to be more adaptive and relevant with needs of the times (Lim, 2022).

Although Thus , the study comprehensive about role Buddhist religious instructor in increase literacy religious Buddhists in Indonesia are still very limited . Research previous tend nature partial and focused on aspects certain just like Wijaya's study (2019) which is more emphasizing the ritual aspect , or Dharmapala's research (2020) which focuses on the use of social media in Buddhist religious counseling . Limitations This cause Not yet existence

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understanding holistic about the role, challenges and strategies of Buddhist religious extension workers in increase literacy religious Buddhists.

Meta- analysis become relevant approach for fill in gap the Because allow synthesis various studies that have been done For to obtain pattern general and more detailed conclusions comprehensive (Glass, 2018). As expressed by Rosenthal and DiMatteo (2016), meta- analysis can produce more findings strong and able generalized compared to studies single . Therefore that, this research aiming For analyze role Buddhist religious instructor in increase literacy religious Buddhists through meta- analysis approach to various article journal that has been published .

In general specifically, this research aiming to: 1) identify roles main Buddhist religious instructor in increase literacy religious people; 2) analyze challenges and obstacles faced Buddhist religious instructor in effort increase literacy religious; and 3) formulating effective strategies for Buddhist religious instructor in increase literacy religious Buddhists in Indonesia. The results of this study expected can give contribution significant for development of an effective and adaptive Buddhist religious counseling model with need Buddhists in the contemporary era.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative meta-analysis approach with a systematic literature review method. Qualitative meta-analysis allows researchers to integrate and synthesize findings from multiple qualitative studies to identify key themes and emerging patterns (Noblit & Hare, 2018). This method was chosen because of its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex and multidimensional phenomena such as the role of religious instructors in improving religious literacy.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of journal articles in electronic databases including Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and the religious journal portal of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. The search used predetermined keywords, including "Buddhist religious instructors", "Buddhist religious literacy", "Dharma education", "Buddhist community development", and their combinations. In addition, researchers also conducted searches in religious journals that specifically discuss Buddhism studies, such as the Dharmasmrti Journal, the Vidyasastra Journal, and the Smaratungga Journal.

The inclusion criteria used for article selection include: 1) articles published in the period 2015-2024; 2) articles discussing topics related to Buddhist religious education and/or Buddhist religious literacy; 3) articles published in scientific journals indexed at least Sinta 6; and 4) articles can be accessed online. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: 1) articles in the form of opinion or popular articles; 2) articles that have not gone through a peer-review process; and 3) duplicate articles.

Of the 78 articles initially identified, 15 articles met the inclusion criteria and were used for further analysis. The profile of the articles analyzed included 8 field research articles, 5 literature review articles, and 2 development research articles. Based on geographical coverage, 9 articles discussed the national context, while the other 6 articles focused on specific regions in Indonesia (Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Kalimantan).

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The stages of analysis include: 1) in-depth reading of each article to gain a comprehensive understanding; 2) coding of key findings related to the role of religious instructors, challenges faced, and strategies used; 3) grouping these codes into broader themes; 4) reviewing and refining themes; and 5) naming and defining final themes. To ensure the credibility of the research results, the researcher conducted researcher triangulation by involving two independent researchers in the coding and theme analysis process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Role of Buddhist Religious Counselors in Increasing Religious Literacy

Based on a meta-analysis of 15 journal articles studied, four main roles of Buddhist religious instructors were identified in efforts to improve Buddhist religious literacy. The four roles are: 1) transmitter of Buddhist knowledge; 2) facilitator of religious literacy programs;

3) mediator between traditional teachings and contemporary needs; and 4) agent of social transformation.

3.1.1. Buddhist Knowledge Transmitter

The first and most fundamental role of a Buddhist instructor is as a transmitter of Buddhist knowledge. In this capacity, an instructor is responsible for introducing, explaining, and interpreting the teachings of the Buddha to the people. As expressed by Prajñānanda (2021), instructors act as "extensions of the Buddha" in conveying the Dharma in the contemporary era. A study conducted by Wirawan (2020) on 45 Buddhist instructors in Central Java showed that 85% of the instructor activities focused on introducing and explaining the basic concepts of Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the law of karma.

The main purpose of this knowledge transmission is to improve people's understanding of the Buddha's teachings as the foundation of their religious practice. Dhammavijaya's (2019) research revealed that a strong doctrinal understanding is positively correlated with the quality of daily religious practice. However, the main challenge in this role is how to convey the complex teachings of the Buddha in simple language that is easy to understand for people from various educational backgrounds.

Mahayana (2022) in his study of Buddhist religious outreach methods in the digital era found that effective religious outreach workers are those who are able to "translate" complex Buddhist philosophical concepts into language and examples that are relevant to the daily lives of the people. This is in line with the principle of causal effort (right effort) in Buddhist teachings which emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching methods to the capacity and needs of the listener.

3.1.2. Religious Literacy Program Facilitator

The second role of Buddhist religious instructors is as facilitators of religious literacy programs. In this capacity, religious instructors not only convey knowledge, but also design, organize, and evaluate various programs aimed at improving religious literacy among Buddhists. A study by Gunawan and Dharmika (2020) among Buddhist communities in Bali showed that religious instructors play a central role in the development and implementation of programs such as Dharma classes, meditation retreats, and Dharma study group discussions.

Religious literacy programs facilitated by Buddhist counselors cover a wide spectrum, from activities for children and youth (such as Buddhist Sunday School and Dharma Camp), to programs for adults and the elderly (such as Abhidhamma study groups and meditation groups). Karuna (2021) found that diversifying religious literacy programs based on age groups and levels of understanding of the congregation significantly increased the effectiveness of the programs.

In their role as facilitators, Buddhist religious educators are also responsible for ensuring that learning methods are appropriate to the characteristics of the congregation. Bodhi's (2018) research shows that the implementation of andragogy principles (adult education) in religious literacy programs for adults results in higher levels of participation and understanding than conventional pedagogical approaches. The andragogy approaches applied include experiential learning, reflective dialogue, and independent learning projects.

3.1.3. Mediator between Traditional Teachings and Contemporary Needs

The third role identified is as a mediator between traditional Buddhist teachings and the contemporary needs of the people. In the midst of modernization and globalization, Buddhists are faced with various new challenges and questions that require interpretation of Buddhist teachings in a contemporary context. Vijaya (2020) states that Buddhist religious instructors act as "hermeneutical bridges" that connect sacred texts written thousands of years ago with the realities of people's lives in the 21st century.

A case study conducted by Nyana (2021) on Buddhist religious instructors in Jakarta showed that 70% of questions asked by the congregation in religious consultation sessions were related to contemporary issues such as business ethics from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism's view of reproductive technology, and the relevance of meditation practices in

overcoming stress in the modern world. This underscores the importance of the mediation role played by religious instructors.

Sugatabhikkhu (2019) argues that this mediation ability requires two main qualifications: a deep understanding of the Buddha's teachings and sensitivity to contemporary issues. A religious instructor must be able to "read" the Buddhist sacred texts in their historical context and creatively interpret them to answer contemporary questions without distorting the essence of the teachings. This is in line with the concept of "two truths" in the Madhyamika tradition which distinguishes between conventional truth (samvrti-satya) and ultimate truth (paramartha-satya).

3.1.4. Agents of Social Transformation

The fourth role of Buddhist religious instructors is as agents of social transformation. Religious literacy does not stop at doctrinal understanding, but must also be realized in individual and social transformation. Dhammasubho (2020) argues that Buddhist religious instructors have a responsibility to encourage the application of Buddhist values in social life.

Vajira's (2022) research in a rural Buddhist community in East Java shows that effective religious educators not only teach Buddhist theory but are also actively involved in social initiatives that reflect values such as loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), and social service (dhammacara). These initiatives include assistance programs for the underprivileged, skills training for youth, and interfaith dialogue forums.

Metta (2019) observed that the involvement of religious instructors in social transformation has a dual impact: increasing the relevance of Buddhist teachings to everyday life and strengthening the position of the Buddhist community as an integral part of Indonesia's pluralistic society. This is especially important given the minority status of the Buddhist community in Indonesia, which often faces challenges in terms of visibility and social recognition.

3.2. Challenges and Obstacles in Improving Religious Literacy

The meta-analysis of 15 journal articles also identified four main categories of challenges and obstacles faced by Buddhist religious educators in their efforts to improve religious literacy among the community. These challenges and obstacles are: 1) limited human and financial resources; 2) geographical and demographic barriers; 3) diversity of educational backgrounds of the community; and 4) the need for innovative teaching methods.

3.2.1. Human and Financial Resource Limitations

The first challenge is related to limited resources, both human and financial. Dharmaputra's research (2021) shows that the ratio of Buddhist religious instructors to the number of followers is still very disproportionate. Nationally, the ratio is 1:2800, far above the ideal ratio of 1:1000 as recommended by the Ministry of Religion. This disparity is more pronounced in areas with a dispersed Buddhist population such as Kalimantan and Sulawesi.

In addition to the limited number, the issue of the qualifications of extension workers is also a concern. A survey conducted by Mahathera (2020) of 120 Buddhist extension workers in Indonesia showed that only 45% had a formal Buddhist educational background, while the rest came from general educational backgrounds and gained Buddhist knowledge through non-formal education. Although non-formal knowledge does not always correlate negatively with the quality of extension, the absence of a strong theoretical foundation can affect the depth and breadth of extension materials.

In terms of finance, most Buddhist outreach activities still rely on independent funds from the community (paramita funds) and voluntary donations. Sangha (2021) noted that although the government through the Ministry of Religion has allocated funds for outreach activities, the distribution is often uneven and insufficient to support comprehensive and sustainable religious literacy programs.

3.2.2. Geographic and Demographic Barriers

The second challenge is related to the geographical and demographic conditions of the Buddhist community in Indonesia. As a minority religion, Buddhists are often unevenly distributed across various regions in Indonesia. Ratanasara (2020) stated that outside of

traditional Buddhist pockets such as Bangka Belitung, Riau, and several areas in Jakarta, Buddhists live in small, widely scattered communities. This condition makes it difficult to organize regular and affordable religious literacy programs.

Distance and accessibility are significant barriers, especially in remote areas. A case study conducted by Punna (2019) in West Kalimantan showed that some Buddhist communities in the interior only received visits from religious instructors 3-4 times a year due to limited access to transportation. This condition is clearly not ideal for the process of fostering religious literacy which requires continuity and intensity.

In addition, migration and urbanization patterns also present their own challenges. Sakyaputta (2021) observed that urban Buddhist communities, especially in large cities, tend to have busy lifestyles with limited time to participate in religious activities regularly. This requires religious instructors to develop program formats that are more flexible and efficient in terms of time usage.

3.2.3. Diversity of Educational Backgrounds of the People

The third challenge is related to the diversity of educational backgrounds of Buddhists. Dhammadhiro's (2020) research shows that the variation in the level of education of Buddhists is quite wide, ranging from those who have not completed basic education to those with higher education. This heterogeneity makes it difficult for religious instructors to determine the level of complexity of the material and choose the right delivery method.

Bodhi (2018) identified that differences in general literacy capacity significantly affect the ability of people to understand Buddhist texts, especially those containing abstract philosophical concepts such as anatta (non-self) and sunyata (emptiness). Religious educators often face a dilemma: if the material is simplified too much, important aspects of the Buddha's teachings can be distorted; but if presented in its full complexity, the risk of misunderstanding or incomprehension is high.

Suvaco (2022) emphasizes the importance of a differentiated approach to Buddhist outreach, where materials and methods are tailored to the level of understanding and specific needs of different groups of devotees. This approach, while ideal, requires a substantial investment of time and energy from religious outreach workers, who are often already burdened with other responsibilities.

3.2.4. The Need for Innovative Teaching Methods

The fourth challenge relates to the need for innovative teaching methods, especially in dealing with changing information consumption patterns in the digital era. Lilavati's (2021) research shows that the younger generation of Buddhists, especially Generation Z, have different learning preferences than previous generations. They tend to be more visual, interactive, and accustomed to information presented in short and interesting formats.

In the face of these changes, conventional outreach methods that rely on formal lectures and discussions are often perceived as "old-fashioned" and "boring". Uttara (2020) found that the level of youth participation in conventional religious outreach activities has declined significantly in the last decade, with only 30% of Buddhist youth regularly attending Dharma classes.

On the other hand, Mahayana (2022) noted that digital Buddhist content such as podcasts, short videos, and infographics have seen a rapid increase in popularity. This indicates that interest in Buddhism remains, but the way it is accessed has changed. The challenge for religious educators is to adapt their methods to this trend without sacrificing the depth and integrity of the Buddha's teachings.

3.3. Effective Strategies in Improving Religious Literacy of Buddhists

Based on the analysis of various journal articles, five main strategies were identified that were effective in the efforts of Buddhist religious instructors to improve religious literacy of the community. These strategies are: 1) development of a gradual literacy program; 2) integration of digital and conventional literacy; 3) contextualization of Buddhist teachings; 4) participatory andragogical approach; and 5) cross-institutional collaboration.

3.3.1. Development of Gradual Literacy Program

The first identified strategy is the development of a gradual and systematic religious literacy program. Dharmadhiro (2020) proposed a "Buddhist literacy ladder" model consisting of four progressive stages: 1) basic literacy (introduction to fundamental concepts); 2) functional literacy (understanding of teachings and their basic applications); 3) critical literacy (ability to analyze and reflect on teachings); and 4) transformative literacy (ability to integrate teachings into daily life and transform oneself and the environment).

The implementation of this gradual model allows religious instructors to adjust materials and methods to the level of understanding of the congregation. A two-year longitudinal study conducted by Sangharakkhita (2021) on the Buddhist community in Yogyakarta showed that this gradual approach increased knowledge retention and active participation of the congregation in religious literacy programs.

In addition, a stepwise approach also allows for more focused and measurable program development. Sukhi (2019) noted that literacy programs with specific and measurable learning objectives tend to be more effective than programs with general and abstract objectives. For example, a program with the specific objective of "people can explain and apply the Four Limitless (Brahmavihara) in the context of the family" produces better understanding and application than a program with the general objective of "people understand the Buddha's teaching on loving-kindness".

3.3.2. Integration of Digital and Conventional Literacy

The second strategy is the integration of digital literacy with conventional approaches. Facing the challenges of the digital era, Buddhist educators need to develop what Mahayana (2022) calls "digital dharma" – the delivery of Buddhist teachings through digital platforms and social media. However, this digital approach is not intended to replace, but rather complement, conventional face-to-face methods.

Dhammavijaya (2019) proposed a "blended dharma education" model that integrates online and offline learning. In this model, knowledge-based content is presented through digital platforms (videos, podcasts, online articles) that can be accessed flexibly, while face-to-face meetings focus on in-depth discussions, meditation practices, and experiential aspects of Dharma learning.

Vajira (2022) found that a combination of digital media and face-to-face meetings resulted in higher levels of engagement than approaches that relied on one method alone. For example, Dharma discussion groups that were enhanced with WhatsApp groups for content sharing and follow-up discussions showed 40% higher levels of engagement than groups that relied solely on regular physical meetings.

Interestingly, Uttara (2020) noted that digital approaches are not only beneficial for the younger generation, but also for elderly people with limited mobility. With Buddhist content available online, elderly people who have difficulty attending temple events can still access Dharma learning materials. This shows the potential for broader inclusion of digital approaches.

3.3.3. Contextualization of Buddhist Teachings

The third strategy is contextualizing Buddhist teachings in contemporary life. Nyana (2021) emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between classical Buddhist texts and the realities of modern life. This contextualization involves the process of "translating" Buddhist concepts into language and examples that are relevant to the lived experiences of people today.

Vijaya (2020) identified three effective contextualization approaches: 1) a narrative approach, which uses contemporary stories to illustrate Buddhist principles; 2) a comparative approach, which compares Buddhist concepts with concepts in modern disciplines such as psychology or science; and 3) an applicative approach, which focuses on the practical application of Buddhist teachings to everyday challenges.

A case study conducted by Karuna (2021) shows how contextualizing the Four Noble Truths within a contemporary mental health framework helped urban Buddhists understand the relevance of these teachings in managing stress and anxiety. By linking the concepts of "dukkha" (unsatisfactoriness) to the modern phenomenon of stress and "magga" (path) to

mindfulness-based stress management techniques, religious educators successfully increased the acceptance and practical application of these teachings.

3.3.4. Participatory Andragogy Approach

The fourth strategy is the use of a participatory andragogical approach in religious literacy programs for adults. Unlike more directive pedagogical approaches, andragogy emphasizes experiential learning, learner autonomy, and practical relevance (Bodhi, 2018). In the context of Buddhist counseling, this approach positions the congregation as active participants in the learning process, not just passive recipients.

Dhammasubho (2020) identified several effective andragogical methods in Buddhist outreach: 1) Socratic dialogue, which encourages devotees to find understanding through reflective questions; 2) case studies, which invite devotees to analyze real-life situations using a Buddhist perspective; 3) action projects, which involve devotees in applying Buddhist principles to address issues in their communities; and 4) reflective learning, which encourages devotees to reflect on their spiritual experiences.

Sangharakkhita's (2021) research shows that Dharma study groups that adopt a participatory approach show higher levels of conceptual understanding and practical application than groups with a traditional lecture approach. In addition, member satisfaction and retention rates are also higher in participatory groups.

3.3.5. Cross-Institutional Collaboration

The fifth strategy is to build cross-institutional collaboration in developing religious literacy. Dharmaputra (2021) emphasized the importance of synergy between religious instructors, monasteries, Buddhist educational institutions, and Buddhist community organizations in developing a comprehensive religious literacy ecosystem.

This collaboration can take various forms, such as joint training programs for religious educators, development of standardized curricula and learning materials, and sharing of resources to reach remote communities. Sangha (2021) notes that religious literacy programs that involve cross-institutional collaboration tend to be more sustainable and have a broader impact than initiatives that are run in isolation.

Gunawan and Dharmika (2020) describe a "pentahelix" model in the development of Buddhist religious literacy involving five elements: religious instructors, Buddhist educational institutions, sangha (community of monks/nuns), Buddhist organizations, and government. Through the collaboration of these five elements, religious literacy programs can be developed in a more structured and systematic manner by utilizing the strengths of each party.

One form of collaboration that is considered effective is the Buddhist Counselors Network, which allows for the exchange of experiences, methods, and learning materials between counselors in various regions. Metta (2019) noted that such networks are very helpful for counselors in areas with minority Buddhist populations who often face limited resources and professional support.

4. Conclusions

Based on a meta-analysis of 15 journal articles on the role of Buddhist religious instructors in improving religious literacy among the people, it can be concluded that religious instructors play a multidimensional role that includes knowledge transmission, program facilitation, cultural mediation, and social transformation. The effectiveness of these roles is greatly influenced by the capacity of the instructors to overcome various challenges such as limited resources, geographical barriers, diversity of community backgrounds, and the need for methodological innovation.

This study also identified five effective strategies in improving Buddhist religious literacy: development of gradual literacy programs, integration of digital and conventional literacy, contextualization of Buddhist teachings, participatory andragogical approaches, and cross-institutional collaboration. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, but can be implemented simultaneously and mutually reinforcing.

An important finding of this study is the need for a holistic and adaptive approach to Buddhist outreach. Holistic in the sense of encompassing various dimensions of religious literacy (doctrinal knowledge, ritual practice, social ethics, and spiritual experience) and

adaptive in the sense of being responsive to the specific needs of the diverse Buddhist communities in Indonesia.

Based on these findings, this study recommends three strategic steps to strengthen the role of Buddhist religious instructors in improving religious literacy of the community. First, the development of a systematic training program for Buddhist religious instructors that includes substantive competencies (mastery of Buddhist teachings), pedagogical (effective learning methods), and technological (utilization of digital media). Second, the establishment of a collaborative forum that brings together religious instructors, monasteries, Buddhist educational institutions, and community organizations in developing an integrated religious literacy program. Third, the development of a database and repository of Dharma learning materials that can be widely accessed by religious instructors in various regions.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, despite its efforts to cover a variety of geographical contexts, this study may not fully represent the diversity of Buddhist communities in Indonesia. Second, this study focuses on the methodological and organizational aspects of religious outreach, but does not explore the underlying theological and philosophical dimensions. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore the theological basis of Buddhist religious literacy and how this influences outreach approaches in various Buddhist traditions in Indonesia.

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