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THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AMONG ACEHNESE EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract: *Teachers' beliefs have a significant impact on their teaching practice. Ultimately, teachers' beliefs, which also influence their consciousness, teaching attitudes, teaching methods, and teaching policies, have an effect on the development of their students. Although there has been extensive research on teachers' beliefs, there has not been much done explicitly on teachers' or pre-service teachers' religious beliefs. Therefore, using a qualitative method, this study sought to understand the significance of religious beliefs in Aceh's EFL pre-service teachers' lives. Five pre-service teachers from an English Language Education Department at one of the Islamic universities in Aceh provided the data in the form of reflective journals and interviews. Using codes and themes, the collected data underwent a qualitative analysis. The results showed that religion had an impact on pre-service teachers in five areas, including going through a tough period, participating in religious activities, interacting with others, seeking knowledge, and considering their future careers. It can be concluded that the pre-service teachers were very committed to Islamic values.*

Keywords : *Religious Beliefs, Teachers' Beliefs, Pre-service Teachers*

Abstrak: Keyakinan guru memiliki dampak yang signifikan pada praktek mengajar mereka. Pada akhirnya, keyakinan guru, yang juga mempengaruhi kesadaran, sikap mengajar, metode pengajaran, dan kebijakan pengajaran mereka, berpengaruh pada perkembangan siswanya. Meskipun telah ada penelitian yang ekstensif tentang keyakinan guru, belum banyak dilakukan secara eksplisit tentang keyakinan agama guru atau calon guru. Oleh karena itu, dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, penelitian ini berusaha untuk memahami pentingnya kepercayaan agama dalam kehidupan calon guru EFL di Aceh. Lima calon guru dari Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di salah satu universitas Islam di Aceh memberikan data dalam bentuk jurnal reflektif dan wawancara. Menggunakan kode dan tema, data yang terkumpul menjalani analisis kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa agama berdampak pada calon guru dalam lima hal, antara lain melalui masa sulit, mengikuti kegiatan keagamaan, berinteraksi dengan orang lain, mencari ilmu, dan mempertimbangkan karir masa depan mereka. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa para calon guru tersebut sangat komitmen dengan nilai-nilai Islam.

Kata kunci : *Keyakinan Agama, Keyakinan Guru, Calon Guru*

INTRODUCTION

Religious beliefs have crucial roles in the lives of some individuals, including teachers. While many studies have been conducted on teachers' beliefs (see, for example, Barcelos, 2015;

Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Kern, 1995; Lee, 2009; Muijs & Reynolds, 2002) little research has been specifically done on teachers' or pre-service teachers' religious beliefs. According to Yumarnamto & Prijambodo (2020), teachers' religious beliefs have not attracted scholars since

they are a sensitive subject frequently positioned against scientific ideas. In the Indonesian educational context, however, religions are openly practiced in public schools since the country's ideology, "Pancasila", declares that it believes in one supreme God (see Hoon, 2017; Yumarnamto & Prijambodo, 2020). The Indonesian government even supports its province, Aceh, in implementing Islamic law across the province and including Islamic-based values in Aceh's education system (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014). This study, therefore, explored the Acehnese EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about the role of Islam in their lives.

This study focuses its investigation on the EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs because, to the author's knowledge, there are no other studies concentrating their investigation on EFL pre-service teachers' religious beliefs. It is worthwhile to discuss pre-service teachers because they are at the first stage of their professional development; they are preparing to be skilled and qualified teachers (Tasdemir, Iqbal & Asghar, 2020). Also, as suggested by Pajares (1992, p. 307), the examination of the beliefs of pre-service teachers should be a target of educational studies since it offers significant information "in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot."

This study seeks to understand the impact of pre-service EFL teachers' religious beliefs on their lives as students enrolled in an EFL teaching program. The study's results give insight to experts and practitioners on how pre-service teachers in an Islamic context think about the importance of their

religious beliefs to their early career journey as teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Belief

Researchers have defined "beliefs" variously (e.g., Borg, 2006; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). Pajares (1992, p.309), for example, coined several terms that are similar to "beliefs," such as "attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories,...". According to Borg (2001), beliefs are the reality that individuals consider to be true, can be conscious or unconscious, relate to individuals' feelings, and have an impact on individuals' thoughts and actions. In addition to that, Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 60) asserts that beliefs "govern one's thoughts, words, and actions". Ford (1994) suggests that beliefs are an individual's perspective shaped by experiences or by the concepts introduced during the learning process. The diversity of definitions proposed reflects the complex nature of beliefs.

From a social standpoint, beliefs are viewed as emerging in social contexts and changing as a result of particular social interactions (Wood, 2003). Also, beliefs are reflections on all issues, including those we do not fully understand but are still confident enough to engage in (Khader, 2012). In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), beliefs are considered teachers' and students' thoughts and ideas about teaching or learning a second or foreign language, shaped as a result of their interactions with their teaching and learning

settings (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013).

Teachers' Beliefs

There have been numerous discussions about teachers' beliefs in the scientific literature for more than 50 years (Fives & Gill, 2015). Although beliefs are studied extensively in the field of teacher education, the term "belief" is not standardized (Skott, 2015). Mansour (2009) regards beliefs as a type of knowledge. However, Richardson (1996) argues that beliefs differ from knowledge since they do not have to be true. Teacher beliefs are also seen as static and dynamic. Hoy, Davis and Pape (2006) view teachers' beliefs as relatively stable, asserting that beliefs are the results of teachers' experiences as students, which subsequently serve as a lens through which current teaching techniques are addressed. However, in the opposite direction, Muijs and Reynolds (2002) conceptualize beliefs as dynamic and passable mental constructs that can change in response to new experiences.

Teachers' beliefs are affected by several sources, including teacher education, previous learning experiences, and teaching experiences (Nishino, 2012). Teachers' beliefs can be influenced by their learning experiences (Brown & Melear, 2006). Vinogradova and Ross's (2019) study demonstrates that the images that pre-service teachers had of their teachers during their years of language learning could have had an impact on their beliefs. Mansour (2008) classifies teachers' formal education as formal experiences, while their every-day life contacts are informal experiences.

Teaching experiences also contribute to the formation of teachers' beliefs (Buehl & Fives, 2009). In this regard, Flores and Day's (2006)

study contends that teachers' beliefs were affected by their initial teaching experiences, either during field placement or in a full-time teaching job. Furthermore, context is also argued to be a factor influencing teachers' beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2003). As Borg (2003, p. 81) suggests, there are some "contextual factors playing an important role in determining the extent to which teachers are able to implement instruction congruent with their cognitions".

Teachers' Religious Beliefs

It has been argued that teachers' beliefs exist as a system (e.g., Fives & Buehl, 2012; Mansour, 2008). Such a concept led to the conclusion that teachers' beliefs are complex and multifaceted (see Basckin, Strnadova & Cumming, 2021) and consist of various factors, including one's view of the world and self and personal values (such as religious beliefs) (Gill & Hoffman, 2009). Concerning religious beliefs in particular, Baurain (2012) emphasizes that studies on teachers' religious beliefs should be conducted since they have not been extensively covered in teachers' beliefs research. In this respect, this study, whose context is strongly influenced by a religion, Islam, explored the pre-service teachers' religious beliefs to understand how these personal beliefs influenced their lives while pursuing their studies at an EFL teaching program.

Barrett (2015, p. 3) calls religious beliefs "beliefs about religion or beliefs that are derived from religion." From a cultural point of view, religion itself is viewed as a system that specifies worldviews, practices, behaviors, ethics, and holy places and that connects individuals with transcendental revelations or

supernatural realisms (Engler & Gardiner, 2017).

In the Islamic concept, religion refers to '*dīn*' defined as "centered on the idea of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture, and observance of righteous behavior, including frequent prayer, expiation for sin committed, periodic fasting, and a charitable and humble demeanor (Donner, 2010, pp. 68-69)". The term "religion" in this study specifically refers to "*dīn*" which is the religion of Muslims. The beliefs in this study refer to the participants' Islamic religious beliefs in terms of all Islamic values and practices in relation to their status as EFL teaching students.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative research design to explore EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs. A qualitative design was chosen because it enabled the researcher to delve into the participants' personal experiences (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022). The participants of this study were five EFL pre-service teachers studying for their fifth semester of a bachelor's degree at an Islamic university in Aceh, Indonesia. In this study, their names were written under the pseudonyms Daud, Wardah, Yasin, Yasmin, and Yusuf.

The participants were purposively recruited based on three criteria: they were Acehnese EFL pre-service teachers; they had had enough study experience at universities for two years; and more importantly, they considered themselves religious and believed in Islamic values in their lives. To approach the participants, the researcher visited their class and informed them about her intention

to conduct a study related to Acehnese EFL pre-service teachers' religious beliefs. The pre-service teachers who were interested in participating in the study were given a consent form.

Informed by the qualitative research paradigm, this study used semi-structured interviews and written reflections as its instruments of data collection (Barkhuizen, 2014; Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Written reflections were used to gain initial data regarding the participants' reflections on their religious beliefs. The participants were instructed to write their reflections on their religious beliefs based on a series of questions from the researcher on a blank piece of paper. Additionally, to enrich the data, they had the freedom to respond in more detail to the theme about their religious beliefs that went beyond the guiding questions.

Semi-structured interviews were also employed as a main instrument to gather more detailed information on the pre-service teachers' religious beliefs. An interview protocol was developed based on the research questions, previous studies, and the participants' written reflections. Each participant took part in a face-to-face interview that lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each interview was administered individually and audio-recorded.

The data were analyzed qualitatively. Each interview transcript and pre-service teacher reflection from reflective journals were carefully read and coded for themes that seemed relevant to the research questions of this study. Moreover, the emerging themes were analyzed, reviewed, refined, reduced, and integrated. Finally, the

conclusion was drawn as the final result of data analysis (see Burnard et al., 2008). Additionally, to validate findings, data sources (interviews and teacher journals) were triangulated. Triangulation aimed to strengthen the conclusions drawn from this study to understand the issue of teachers' religious beliefs (see Guion, 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Relationship between Going through Personal Hardships and Increasing One's Religiosity

All the participants had the same perceptions of the correlations between going through difficult times and becoming more religious. They agreed that, because of their difficult circumstances, they were more religious. For instance, Yusuf said that he felt more connected to Allah and his faith when he had financial, academic, and personal issues. These connections could help him feel more positive.

As a student, I actually had issues with money, learning the material, adjusting to some of my lecturers' teaching styles, and having issues at home. When I was depressed, I returned to my religion and prayed to Allah. Psychologically, it impacted me positively. I had the impression that Allah had heard my prayers during this difficult time. I felt like I was facing fewer difficulties, and I stopped caring about them. (Yusuf, Interview)

Likewise, Daud linked going through a challenging period to increasing his religiosity.

I must be closer to Allah when He puts me through a hardship. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2019. Due to my prolonged inability to be cured, I had been hopeless. I wanted to commit

suicide; I asked Allah to keep me safe from that action! I was thankful for my own situation during my rehabilitation at the mental health institution because I saw how much worse off many other people were. I was kept in a solitary room while receiving treatment. I had to be courageous. Following that, I worshipped there. I was prohibited from bringing any tools into the room, including the Quran, for fear that I might harm myself while using them. As a result, I was unable to recite the Quran; instead, I simply memorized some of the passages I already knew. My religion and family were my pillars of support during this difficult time. (Daud, Interview)

The statement from Daud above demonstrates how adhering to his faith helped him cope with psychological issues.

Participants' Religious Practices and Their Functions

Specifically, the participants gave evidence of how their religious practice affected them personally. Yasin, for instance, emphasized how praying and reciting the Quran had assisted him in overcoming his academic difficulties.

I frequently recited verses from the Quran when I was having trouble learning. As a result, I believe I can comprehend challenging learning topics more readily. I made sure to say a prayer to enlighten my heart prior to learning. (Yasin, Teacher Journal)

In the same vein, Wardah claimed that fasting, reciting the Quran, and praying improved the condition of her body.

My religion, which strengthens me as a student, serves as the cornerstone of my life. It has had an impact on my physical and mental well-

being, and I feel more stable overall. I feel physically stronger and mentally calmer when I pray and recite the Quran on a regular basis. My body seems more fit when I fast. I experience less peace and joy and more problems in my life when I am not with Allah. However, I am happier, and the problems go away when I return to Allah. (Wardah, Teacher Journal)

Based on the above excerpt, Wardah also felt Allah's presence as her mental health improved. Warda experienced more joy and fewer problems in her life as a result of feeling the presence of Allah nearby.

Participants' Religious Beliefs on Interaction with People

In light of their religious beliefs, the participants emphasized the importance of maintaining good relationships with other people. Wardah regarded parents as having a unique place in Islam. She even ranked parents below Allah. Due to her parents' unique position, she tried her best to take care of them and please them. She felt it was part of her duty to always look after her parents.

I have an obligation to please my parents. I must assist them by reducing their burden. I worry that as I get older, I won't care as much about them. Truly, I wish I could spend every moment with them. Sincerely, I feel like I can never make them happy enough. I'm thinking about taking them on the Hajj or Umrah in the future. Our religion commands us to please our parents. Our parents come in second to Allah in importance. (Wardah, Interview)

Daud interpreted his positive relationships

with others through the lens of his religion.

I believe that being ill is a manifestation of Allah's love for me; due to my illness, many people love me. Being ill is not a shame. I therefore let my friends know about my medical condition. Due to my limitations, I have support from my family, doctors who help me with my rehabilitation, and friends who attend the same university, join the same organization, and live in the same neighborhood. I get stronger because they understand what I'm going through. By providing me with these loving and caring individuals, Allah is demonstrating His affection for me. (Daud, Interview)

According to the excerpt above, Daud believed that because he received support and affection from others while he was ill, his illness was a gift from Allah for him. His views demonstrated how he relied on God and the help of others to get through his trying times.

Seeking Knowledge

The participants considered acquiring knowledge—such as by continuing their education in an EFL teaching program—to be a necessary component of adhering to their religion's teachings. Yasmin believed that Allah would value her efforts in seeking knowledge and reward her in the afterlife.

I think continuing my education will help me reap Allah's rewards in the hereafter. I learned at my boarding school that pursuing knowledge of both the world and the afterlife can result in significant rewards from Allah. (Yasmin, Interview)

Similarly, Daud related seeking knowledge to

getting Allah's rewards. He specified that the reward in Islam for the knowledge seeker is entering paradise in the hereafter. Also, he thought that his religion served as his source of learning motivation.

As a student, I am a knowledge seeker. Without basic religious teaching, I can become unmotivated to study. The prophet Muhammad obligated every Muslim to seek knowledge. Islam holds that pursuing knowledge can help a Muslim join paradise more easily and that useful knowledge can continue to reward its seeker even after death. (Daud, Teacher Journal)

Meanwhile, according to Yusuf, Islam urged all Muslims to continue their education until death.

Islam recommends its followers pursue knowledge without regard to time constraints. Although I am unsure if I will become a teacher or not, I personally selected the English education program because I believe education is crucial for my future. As a khalifa [leader], I want to be a wise leader for my family and myself. To teach others wisely, I need to be knowledgeable. Islam obligates Muslims to lead their families and themselves. Knowledge is necessary for leadership. (Yusuf, Teacher Journal)

In Yusuf's view, Muslims should develop their leadership abilities in order to assist those around them and even themselves. Therefore, he considered his English teaching program a suitable place to develop his leadership and teaching skills.

Perceiving Future Careers

The participants in this study had chosen an EFL teaching degree, but they were still unsure of their future professions. The participants then interpreted their prospective careers through the

The Impact of Religious....

(Rahmi, 2023)

lens of their religious beliefs. Daud believed that his religion had led him to study in an EFL teaching program. Despite his uncertainty about the future, he made the commitment to serve Allah no matter what job he chose.

My faith serves as my guide while I'm enrolled in this teaching program. I don't know what career I'll have in the future, but I have faith that whatever I do will satisfy Allah and be helpful to others. I will abide by my faith's principles no matter what career I choose. I need to study hard right now; that's the most crucial issue. Later, I'll be able to put the knowledge I'm acquiring into practice. (Daud, Teacher Journal)

Likewise, Yasin was worried about his future.

I occasionally worry about my future. (Yasin, Teacher Journal)

He argued that his lack of faith was the root of his uncertainties and concerns about his future employment. As a student, he felt that he was not financially stable.

Perhaps because my faith is still weak, I continue to have doubts about the future. I occasionally compare myself with my friends. They already had money, whereas I am still only a student with no source of income. I am aware that Allah claims to have ensured the financial security of every person from the moment of their birth until the moment of their death. (Yasin, Interview)

However, Yasin realized that everyone's wealth is given by Allah.

Discussion

The primary goals of this study were to investigate the impact of pre-service teachers' religious beliefs on their lives as students in an EFL teaching program. The overall results confirmed

the findings of other studies on teachers' religious beliefs (e.g., Yumarnamto & Prijambodo, 2020; Yuwono & Harbon, 2010), showing that religion had a favorable influence on teachers' lives.

Specifically, five key influencing factors were underlined. First, the pre-service teachers claimed that going through a challenging period made them more religious. In times of difficulty, such as experiencing social, financial, and mental health issues, they returned to Islam. This study's findings are in line with Durkheim's (1951) argument, stating that religion met both social and psychological needs. Religion has a significant impact on social interaction as well as the stability of one's mental health; people who follow a religion with distinct lines of uncontested religious authority are less likely to commit suicide. For instance, in this study, Daud, who suffered from bipolar disorder and had the intention to commit suicide, practiced Islamic teaching to battle his mental disorder and not to kill himself.

The participants also described how their religious practices affect their daily lives. They found it helpful to get through their days as university students by sensing Allah's presence, praying, and reciting the Quran. This finding is in agreement with Akrim, Rudianto, and Adhani (2021), who highlight the importance of religious practices in helping Muslim health professionals develop coping strategies so they may survive in a difficult setting. Wachholtz and Sambamoorthi's (2011) study also supported the view of the positive effect of religious practice, arguing that over time, there was a growing positive correlation between pain and prayer use for medical issues.

Next, the participants argued that, guided by their religious beliefs, they built good relationships with other people, such as parents and friends. A strong connection with their communities was considered a support system for them. The way that the participants interacted with one another in their communities was influenced by Islamic beliefs. As suggested by Pargament (1997), people look for a sense of intimacy and connection inside their spiritual communities, where they can support one another and enhance their faith.

Also, the participants related their religious beliefs to seeking knowledge. In their opinion, seeking knowledge is a responsibility of Muslims, as it is commanded in Islam. They believed that pursuing knowledge would have an impact on their self-development in this world. They also thought that they would be rewarded by Allah in the next life due to their status as knowledge seekers. As Halstead (2004, p. 521) notes, the traditions (hadith) of the prophet Muhammad provide insight into seeking knowledge for Muslims, declaring "seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman." Even the Qur'an honors knowledge seekers as individuals working to understand religious matters (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), and it assigns them the responsibility of imparting their knowledge and skills to others who lack the opportunity to do so (Yasin & Jani, 2013).

Finally, the participants view their future through the lens of their religious beliefs. Although the participants had chosen an EFL teaching program, they still doubted about their future careers and whether they would work in the teaching profession. Despite their future

uncertainty, they believed that their career path was under the control of Allah, who guided them in the right direction and gave them the best things. As argued by Parrott (2017), for Muslims, on the Preserved Tablet, Allah commanded all things, which remain unchanged in an absolute sense. However, depending on the steps they take, the fulfillment of those decrees may change. It means that, to some extent, there is always free will for Muslims to choose any path in their lives.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

The current study examined the role of religious beliefs for Acehese EFL pre-service teachers. The results led to the conclusion that the pre-service teachers had strong ties to Islamic values. The participants held the view that their religious beliefs could help them through trying times and enable them to engage in constructive religious activities. The participants also acknowledged that their religious beliefs positively affected how they interacted with others, sought education, and perceived their future careers.

Despite having value, this study has some limitations. First, there were just five Acehese EFL pre-service teachers in Aceh who took part in this study. It cannot be presumed that their ideas reflected those of Aceh's other pre-service teachers. Second, the pre-service teachers' stated beliefs—which might not fully reflect their true opinions—in their reflective journals and interviews were the only ones included in this study.

Suggestions

The preliminary findings presented here
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highlight the need for additional research examining the roles of religious beliefs among EFL/ESL pre-service teachers in broader contexts. Given that in-service teachers play important roles in the education context, this research also calls for further research on the subject of religious beliefs among in-service teachers to investigate how these beliefs influence their lives as teachers.

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