

**THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS COUNSELORS IN STRENGTHENING EXCELLENT AND CHARACTER-BASED EDUCATION: A LITERATURE ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION POLICY**

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**Abstract**

Excellent and character-based education has become a strategic agenda in the transformation of religious education in Indonesia, particularly amid challenges related to strengthening students' morality, integrating spiritual values, and improving the quality of adaptive education. Within this context, Islamic religious counselors occupy a strategic position not only as religious guides for the community, but also as actors in strengthening character education. This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic religious counselors in reinforcing excellent and character-based education through a literature-based analysis of religious education policies. The study employed a qualitative approach using library research through the analysis of academic literature and major policy documents, including the Asta Priority Programs, the Religious Moderation framework, and the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025. The findings reveal that Islamic religious counselors function as educators, counselors, motivators, and facilitators in students' character formation, while recent regulations strengthen their position in a more implementation-oriented manner within the religious education system. These findings confirm that the integration of strategic and technical policies contributes to the strengthening of education that is excellent, character-based, and integrated. This study contributes by offering a new conceptual framework regarding the relationship among the role of religious counselors, religious policy, and the strengthening of character education within the field of Islamic Guidance and Counseling.

**Keywords:** Islamic religious counselors, excellent education, character education, religious education policy, Islamic guidance and counseling.

**INTRODUCTION**

The transformation of religious education in Indonesia in recent years has demonstrated a shift in orientation from an approach primarily emphasizing academic achievement toward an educational model that balances excellence, character formation, and the integration of spiritual values. This shift emerged from tangible social concerns, particularly growing anxieties regarding the declining moral quality of students, the weak

internalization of religious values, and the insufficient synergy among formal education, family institutions, and socio-religious guidance. Within this context, strengthening excellent and character-based education cannot be solely entrusted to schools or madrasas, but requires the involvement of socio-religious actors who function to guide, mentor, and reinforce the internalization of values. Islamic religious counselors occupy a strategic position within this framework because they operate at the intersection of educational, da'wah, and social guidance functions (Subhi et al., 2023). The relevance of this issue has become increasingly significant following the introduction of the Asta Priority Programs by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, which place Excellent, Friendly, and Integrated Education as a central policy agenda, alongside the strengthening of its implementation dimension through the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 concerning the Technical Guidelines for Islamic Religious Counselors. These normative developments indicate that the state has begun to recognize the role of religious counselors not only in general community development but also within the ecosystem of character education. Nevertheless, the manner in which this role is conceptually constructed and connected to religious education policies remains an issue that requires further scholarly examination. Therefore, this study departs from the need to understand character education not merely as a pedagogical issue, but also as a matter of policy and socio-religious agency.

Academically, studies on excellent and character-based education have developed within two major streams of scholarship. The first stream emphasizes character education within the framework of Islamic education, rooted in the concepts of *akhlaq*, *adab*, and *tarbiyah*, and substantially influenced by both classical Islamic thought and contemporary educational theories. The second stream focuses on studies of Islamic religious counseling, positioning religious counselors as agents of social transformation, value mediators, and spiritual mentors for the community (Nurafiah & Gaffar Haris, 2024). Although these two streams have expanded considerably, studies integrating them within the framework of religious education policy analysis remain limited. Most previous research has examined character education as an internal pedagogical issue within schools, whereas studies on Islamic religious counselors have predominantly been situated within the contexts of da'wah, community empowerment, or religious moderation. Even when religious education policies are discussed, technical regulations governing religious counselors, including the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, have rarely been treated as primary objects of scholarly analysis. This gap highlights a significant limitation in the existing literature. On the one hand, there is broad consensus that character education is essential and that religious counselors play a strategic role; on the other hand, only a limited number of studies have synthesized how counselors' roles are institutionally strengthened through both strategic and technical policies in support of excellent and character-based education. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by offering an

integrative reading of Islamic educational literature, theories of Islamic guidance and counseling, and recent religious education policy documents.

Based on these social concerns and gaps in the existing literature, this study aims to analyze the role of Islamic religious counselors in strengthening excellent and character-based education through a literature-based examination of religious education policies. More specifically, the study seeks: first, to identify the conceptual construction of excellent and character-based education within the Islamic perspective; second, to analyze the strategic functions of Islamic religious counselors in the development of students; and third, to examine the integration of these roles within major policy documents, namely the Asta Priority Programs, Religious Moderation policy, and the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025. To achieve these objectives, the study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, as this method is considered the most appropriate for examining the relationships among ideas, regulations, and conceptual constructions in depth. Data were collected from books, scholarly journal articles, and policy documents selected purposively based on substantive relevance and contemporaneity. Rather than testing quantitative hypotheses, this study develops conceptual arguments through synthesis and content analysis. The selection of this approach is methodologically grounded in the assumption that the issue under investigation requires interpretive depth rather than statistical measurement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not merely descriptive but also analytical, namely to uncover the interrelationships among socio-religious actors, educational concepts, and policy design.

This study argues that strengthening excellent and character-based education will be more effective when Islamic religious counselors are positioned not merely as complementary actors, but as integral components within the ecosystem of religious education. This argument is grounded in the theoretical premise that character education in Islam is developed through value habituation, exemplary conduct, and social mentoring, all of which constitute the primary domain of religious counselors' work (Suhra et al., 2023). In addition, policy considerations further reinforce this argument, particularly through the emergence of recent regulations, most notably the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, which reflects a more implementation-oriented approach toward the functions of religious counselors. These literary and policy-based evidences suggest significant opportunities for constructing an integrative model that connects formal education, social development, and religious counseling. The contribution of this study lies in its proposal of a new perspective that brings together three domains that have frequently been examined separately, namely character education theory, Islamic counseling studies, and policy analysis. This study is limited to a conceptual analysis of documents and literature and therefore does not empirically evaluate the effectiveness of field implementation. Nevertheless, precisely through this limitation, the study contributes

by developing a conceptual framework that may serve as a foundation for future field-based research. Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its synthesis of strategic policies and technical regulations to reinterpret the role of Islamic religious counselors in strengthening excellent and character-based education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature reviewed in this study is organized into three major themes: excellent and character-based education within the Islamic perspective, the role of Islamic religious counselors in students' development, and the evolution of religious education policies regulating the integration of religious counselors within educational systems. This thematic classification is necessary because the study requires not only conceptual mapping, but also a synthesis of the relationships among themes that have often been discussed separately. Existing literature indicates that character education has been widely developed within the field of Islamic education studies, whereas religious counseling has predominantly been examined within the contexts of da'wah, guidance, and community empowerment. Meanwhile, policy studies, particularly those examining the relationship between strategic regulations such as the Asta Priority Programs and technical regulations such as the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, remain relatively limited. This condition demonstrates the need for more integrative scholarly inquiry. Therefore, this literature review goes beyond merely presenting previous studies; it seeks to trace patterns, identify knowledge gaps, and construct the argumentative foundation for the present research. In this way, the literature review functions not only as a contextual background but also as the conceptual foundation that supports the analytical direction of the study.

The literature on excellent and character-based education demonstrates a strong tendency to conceptualize Islamic education as an integrative process involving the development of knowledge, morality, and students' social responsibility (Syafiqurrohman, 2020). In classical Islamic scholarship, education is positioned as a means of cultivating civilized human beings, whereas contemporary literature expands this framework by incorporating dimensions of competence, innovation, and competitiveness as indicators of educational excellence. A dominant trend within the literature reveals a broad consensus that academic excellence without character is inherently imbalanced, while character education without competency development is considered insufficiently adaptive to the challenges of modernity. Nevertheless, variations in perspective remain regarding how these two dimensions should be integrated. Some studies position character as the foundational basis of the entire educational process, while others regard character as an outcome that accompanies the mastery of competencies. These differing perspectives indicate a significant conceptual dynamic that requires further scholarly examination.

Within the context of this study, such literature serves as the foundation for understanding that excellent and character-based education should not be viewed as two separate agendas, but rather as a unified educational paradigm that is interconnected both normatively and practically.

Studies on Islamic religious counselors in the existing literature demonstrate a transition from normative approaches toward more functional and transformational perspectives. In earlier literature, religious counselors were primarily understood as transmitters of religious teachings; however, contemporary studies reveal an expansion of their roles as educators, counselors, social mediators, and agents of community empowerment (Lesmana, 2025). This trend is significant because it corresponds with shifts in policy orientation that increasingly require religious counselors not only to engage in da'wah activities, but also to contribute to students' character development and the strengthening of socio-religious life. Evidence of this growing trend is further reflected in the emergence of technical regulations such as the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, which more explicitly defines the operational scope of counselors' responsibilities (Ruang Lingkup Kegiatan Jabatan Fungsional Penyuluh Agama Islam, 2025). Critically, however, the literature also indicates that studies on religious counselors continue to focus predominantly on their general socio-religious functions and have not sufficiently connected these roles to educational systems. It is within this gap that the present study situates itself. Accordingly, this study employs the existing literature not merely to reaffirm the importance of religious counselors, but to reinterpret their role within the broader framework of excellent and character-based education.

The literature on religious education policy demonstrates a shift from normative policy orientations toward more transformative and integrative approaches. The Asta Priority Programs represent a new orientation toward education that is excellent, friendly, and integrated, while the Religious Moderation policy provides the value-based foundation that supports students' character formation. Meanwhile, the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 introduces a technical dimension that connects broader policy agendas with practical implementation through the role of Islamic religious counselors. When examined collectively, these three policy documents reveal a complementary pattern consisting of strategic policy, value-oriented policy, and operational policy. However, a critical review of the literature indicates that these policies have rarely been analyzed integratively in previous studies. Some studies have treated the Asta Priority Programs merely as a policy context, while others have focused exclusively on Religious Moderation as a normative framework, and very few have positioned technical regulations governing religious counselors as primary objects of analysis. Therefore, this study utilizes policy literature not simply as normative background, but as analytical data for examining how policy design shapes the possibilities for integrating religious counselors into educational processes.

Across the body of literature reviewed in this study, two major patterns emerge. First, there is a strong consensus regarding the importance of character education and the strategic role of Islamic religious counselors. Second, there is a noticeable fragmentation in the ways these two issues have been examined, particularly when connected to religious education policy. A critical evaluation of previous studies indicates that their dominant limitation lies in their partial approach, namely the tendency to discuss educational concepts, the role of religious counselors, or policy frameworks separately without synthesizing the relationships among them. In addition, many existing studies remain largely descriptive and have not sufficiently examined the implications of recent technical regulations for the transformation of counselors' roles. Even the emergence of the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 has received limited scholarly attention in the form of comprehensive literature-based analysis. This condition reveals a clear gap within the existing scholarship. Therefore, this evaluation underscores that the need for further research lies not merely in producing another isolated study, but in developing a more comprehensive synthesis that connects conceptual literature, strategic policy, and technical regulation within a unified analytical framework.

Based on this evaluation, the present study seeks to address the identified gap in the literature through an integrative synthesis approach. This direction is grounded in the assumption that research questions concerning the role of Islamic religious counselors in strengthening excellent and character-based education can only be adequately answered when educational concepts, counseling theories, and policy designs are examined within a single analytical framework. The literature reviewed supports this direction while simultaneously indicating the need for a new contribution that goes beyond merely confirming previous findings by offering a fresh conceptual perspective. The synthesis developed in this study positions Islamic religious counselors not merely as objects of policy, but as strategic actors who are constructed, regulated, and strengthened through religious education policies. Accordingly, the research gap identified in this study lies not simply in the absence of data, but in the lack of integration among existing perspectives. In conclusion, this literature review directs the study toward developing an analytical model that bridges theory, policy, and conceptual practice as a primary contribution to the field of Islamic Guidance and Counseling.

## **METHODS**

The unit of analysis in this study encompasses concepts, policy norms, and constructions of the role of Islamic religious counselors as represented in academic literature and religious education policy documents. The determination of these units of analysis is grounded in the conceptual-analytical objective of the study, namely to examine how the role of Islamic religious counselors is constructed, strengthened, and integrated

within the reinforcement of excellent and character-based education. Accordingly, the units under investigation are not individuals or empirical behaviors, but rather texts as representations of ideas and policy orientations. More specifically, the primary units of analysis consist of three central documents: the Asta Priority Programs, the Religious Moderation policy document, and the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025. These three documents were selected because they represent three distinct levels of policy: strategic, normative, and implementation-oriented. Meanwhile, the secondary units of analysis include books, scholarly journal articles, and previous studies discussing the concepts of excellent and character-based education as well as theories of Islamic guidance and counseling. The determination of these analytical units enables the study to examine the relationship between conceptual frameworks and policy design in a more comprehensive manner. Therefore, the focus of the analysis lies not merely in the content of the documents, but also in the interrelationships among the ideas constructed through those documents.

This study employed a qualitative research design using a library research approach grounded in policy analysis and conceptual analysis (George, 2008). This design was selected because it aligns with the objective of the study, which seeks to examine the relationships among theory, regulation, and the construction of the role of Islamic religious counselors, matters that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative designs. Within this approach, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument responsible for identifying, selecting, interpreting, and synthesizing data sources. Library research was chosen not merely because the study relied on textual sources, but because this method enables an in-depth exploration of normative meanings and the interrelationships among policy documents. Evidence supporting the relevance of this approach can be observed in numerous educational policy studies and conceptual research within the field of Islamic Guidance and Counseling that employ similar methods to develop new theoretical models. Furthermore, this design allows the study to critically examine recent regulations, such as the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, not merely as normative references but as primary objects of analysis. Therefore, the methodological justification of this study lies in its capacity to address research questions that require interpretation and synthesis rather than statistical measurement.

The data sources in this study consisted of primary and secondary materials selected purposively based on their relevance, authority, and contemporaneity. The primary data comprised major policy documents, namely the Asta Priority Programs, the Religious Moderation policy document, and the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025. These documents were positioned as primary sources because they constituted the principal objects of policy analysis within the study. Meanwhile, the secondary data included classical and contemporary literature on Islamic education, Islamic guidance and counseling, as well as scholarly journal articles discussing

character education, Islamic religious counselors, and the implementation of religious education policies. The selection of sources was conducted through purposive sampling, meaning that only sources with substantial relevance to the focus of the study were included. This technique was chosen because the study did not require statistical representation, but rather emphasized the depth and relevance of data. Priority was also given to recent literature in order to capture contemporary developments, particularly regarding shifts in policy orientation and the strengthening of technical regulations governing religious counselors. Through this structure of data sources, the study ensured a sufficiently robust evidential foundation for developing an analysis that is both credible and replicable.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic documentation study involving the identification, selection, classification, and recording of relevant sources. This process was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved searching for and screening sources using inclusion criteria, namely direct relevance to excellent and character-based education, the role of Islamic religious counselors, and religious education policies. The second stage involved data extraction using an analytical guideline consisting of key categories, including character dimensions, counselors' functions, policy orientations, and forms of educational integration. In this study, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument, while the analytical guideline served as a supporting instrument to maintain consistency throughout the data collection process. From an ethical perspective, all sources were utilized in accordance with the principles of traceability, proper citation, and the minimization of selection bias to the greatest extent possible. Methodological transparency was maintained by clearly explaining the origins of the data, the rationale for source selection, and the stages of data collection, thereby enabling the study to be replicated. Accordingly, data collection was not conducted in a purely narrative manner, but rather followed systematic procedures that support the validity of the analysis.

Data analysis in this study employed content analysis using a categorical-thematic approach. This technique was selected because it is particularly suitable for systematically examining policy documents and academic literature through the identification of themes, patterns, relationships of meaning, and normative tendencies. The analysis was conducted in four stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretation of inter-category relationships, and conceptual synthesis. During the reduction stage, information relevant to the focus of the study was selected and filtered. Subsequently, the data were categorized into major themes, including the construction of excellent and character-based education, the functions of Islamic religious counselors, and the integrative orientation of educational policy. The interpretation stage was used to examine causal relationships and meanings emerging from the interaction among themes, including the ways in which the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 strengthens the implementation-oriented dimension of policy. The final stage involved synthesis, namely

the development of findings into a new analytical framework. The selection of this method is justified by its capacity to move the study beyond descriptive exposition toward critical analysis. Therefore, this analytical approach supports the primary objective of the study, namely to generate a conceptually grounded contribution that is academically accountable.

## **RESULTS**

### **Conceptualizing Excellent and Character-Based Education**

The first finding reveals that excellent and character-based education, as reflected in both the literature and policy documents, is not understood as two separate agendas, but rather as an integrated educational paradigm. The analysis of Islamic educational literature and the Asta Priority Programs demonstrates that educational excellence is defined not merely in terms of academic achievement, but also in relation to students' moral, social, and spiritual capacities. The rationale underlying this integration is grounded in the assumption that excellent education must produce students who are not only competent but also possess integrity. Evidence from the policy analysis indicates that the orientation toward "excellent, friendly, and integrated" education positions character formation as an inherent component of educational quality rather than an external addition. Furthermore, the Religious Moderation policy document reinforces the character dimension through values such as tolerance, balance, and social responsibility. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the concept of excellent education within religious education policy is substantively character-centered, thereby creating space for the integration of Islamic religious counselors in strengthening its implementation (Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

A further finding within the first cluster indicates that the dominant dimensions of character identified in both the literature and policy documents encompass three major domains: personal character, social character, and spiritual character. These three dimensions consistently recur across various sources, demonstrating a coherent conceptual pattern. Personal character relates to discipline, integrity, and responsibility; social character concerns moderation, empathy, and social awareness; while spiritual character emphasizes the internalization of religious values. The significance of this mapping lies in the fact that excellent education cannot be operationalized without clear indicators of character formation. The analysis demonstrates that these three dimensions are present both in the literature on Islamic education and in the policy orientations of the Asta Priority Programs and Religious Moderation framework. Interestingly, this pattern reflects a strong alignment between theoretical constructions and policy design. It can therefore be concluded that excellent and character-based education, as conceptualized in this study, possesses a sufficiently robust conceptual structure to serve as the analytical foundation for examining the functions of Islamic religious counselors.

Another significant result within the first finding is the identification of an integrative pattern between formal education and socio-religious guidance as a prerequisite for strengthening students' character formation (Hilmi et al., 2026). Across many of the sources analyzed, character education is considered insufficient when confined solely to classroom settings, but instead requires the support of a broader social ecosystem. It is this rationale that establishes the relevance of Islamic religious counselors as mentoring actors within the educational process. Evidence from both the literature and policy documents indicates that excellent education is not merely institution-oriented, but demands collaboration among schools, families, communities, and religious guidance structures. This pattern is important because it expands the understanding of character education from a purely pedagogical approach toward an ecosystem-based approach. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the conceptualization of excellent and character-based education in this study inherently implies the need for the involvement of external actors, including Islamic religious counselors.

### **Repositioning the Role of Islamic Religious Counselors**

The second finding indicates a significant repositioning of the role of Islamic religious counselors from predominantly traditional da'wah-oriented functions toward more educational and transformational roles. The literature analysis demonstrates that religious counselors are no longer understood merely as transmitters of religious messages, but also as educators, counselors, motivators, and facilitators of students' character development. The rationale behind this transformation is closely related to changing social needs and evolving policy orientations that demand broader responsibilities from religious counselors. The strongest evidence of this shift can be observed in the alignment between recent scholarly literature and the formulation of counselors' functions within contemporary regulations. This pattern suggests that the repositioning of religious counselors is not merely a theoretical discourse, but has also begun to be institutionalized through policy frameworks. Therefore, this finding confirms that Islamic religious counselors, within the context of excellent and character-based education, occupy a far more strategic position than that traditionally understood in conventional models of religious counseling (Subhi et al., 2023).

A further finding demonstrates that the most dominant functions of Islamic religious counselors in strengthening character-based education lie in value mentoring and social mediation roles (Mudrikah & Sihono, 2025). The analysis of previous studies reveals a recurring pattern indicating that religious counselors contribute significantly to the internalization of values, moral reinforcement, and the resolution of socio-religious issues that influence students' character formation. The importance of this finding lies in its demonstration that counselors' contributions should not be viewed as merely supplementary, but rather as substantive components of the character education process.

Evidence from the Religious Moderation policy documents and technical regulations governing religious counselors also reflects strong alignment with these functions. Moreover, the study finds that the social mediation role of religious counselors extends the scope of character reinforcement beyond formal educational institutions. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the contribution of Islamic religious counselors is multidimensional and directly relevant to the broader agenda of excellent education.

A subsequent finding indicates that the repositioning of Islamic religious counselors is not only functional in nature, but also structural. Within the policy analysis, religious counselors are increasingly positioned as integral components of the religious education ecosystem, rather than merely as community guidance actors operating outside the educational system. The significance of this finding lies in its demonstration of a shift in the level of recognition, from normative acknowledgment toward institutional recognition. Evidence of this transformation is reinforced by recent regulations that explicitly connect the responsibilities of religious counselors with more structured forms of educational and social guidance. It can therefore be concluded that the role of Islamic religious counselors is undergoing both conceptual and institutional repositioning that supports the strengthening of excellent and character-based education (Ali, 2024).

### **Structural Reinforcement through the Decree of the Director General Number 794 of 2025**

The third finding reveals that the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 represents a significant milestone in the structural reinforcement of the role of Islamic religious counselors. The content analysis of this document demonstrates a shift from broadly normative regulations toward more operational and implementation-oriented guidelines. The primary significance of this finding lies in the fact that the regulation not only defines the functions of religious counselors, but also provides a more concrete framework for implementation. Evidence from the document analysis indicates a strong emphasis on target communities, performance orientation, and the strengthening of counselors' educational functions. This pattern suggests that the latest technical regulation provides a more robust structural foundation for integrating religious counselors into character education initiatives. Therefore, this regulation constitutes an important finding that expands the scope of the study from the conceptual level toward the level of policy implementation.

A further finding indicates that the structural reinforcement introduced through the Decree of the Director General Number 794 of 2025 is closely correlated with the integrative orientation established within the Asta Priority Programs and the Religious Moderation policy framework. These three documents demonstrate a mutually reinforcing pattern: the Asta Priority Programs provide strategic direction, the Religious Moderation framework offers value orientation, and the Decree of the Director General Number 794 of

2025 supplies implementation-oriented instruments. The significance of this finding lies in its indication of policy coherence rather than policy fragmentation. Evidence from the content analysis reveals substantial interconnections among these documents, particularly concerning character reinforcement, the integration of socio-religious guidance, and the improvement of religious education quality. It can therefore be concluded that the primary strength of these policies lies not in each document individually, but in the integration among them.

The final finding indicates that although the latest regulation strengthens the structural position of Islamic religious counselors, the literature also highlights several implementation challenges, particularly concerning institutional capacity, cross-sectoral coordination, and the operationalization of counselors' roles in practice. The importance of reporting this finding lies in maintaining the objectivity of the study rather than presenting only confirmatory results. Evidence from the literature demonstrates that regulatory reinforcement does not automatically guarantee effective implementation. However, this finding further strengthens the argument that the success of excellent and character-based education requires integration between policy design and implementation readiness. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from the third finding is that the Decree of the Director General Number 794 of 2025 provides significant structural reinforcement for the role of Islamic religious counselors, yet its effectiveness ultimately depends on the broader implementation ecosystem.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal three interrelated points: excellent and character-based education is understood as an integrative educational paradigm, the role of Islamic religious counselors has shifted from traditional functions toward transformational functions (Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025), and recent regulations through the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 have structurally strengthened the position of religious counselors. These three findings are significant because they form a coherent causal relationship: shifts in educational orientation require the strengthening of educational actors, and the strengthening of such actors requires support from implementation-oriented policies. The central meaning of these findings lies not merely in the recognition that religious counselors contribute to character education, but in the fact that such contributions are increasingly gaining both conceptual and structural legitimacy (Sider & Unruh, 2004). Evidence from the analysis demonstrates that the integration of the Asta Priority Programs, the Religious Moderation framework, and technical regulations governing religious counselors has produced a relatively coherent policy configuration. Therefore, this discussion proceeds from the argument that the findings of the study should not be understood as separate outcomes, but rather as a unified

relational model connecting educational paradigms, socio-religious roles, and policy design in mutually reinforcing ways.

Within the Indonesian social context, the findings of this study possess particular relevance because religious education operates within a society that is pluralistic, deeply religious, and characterized by complex social dynamics. This contextualization is important because the effectiveness of the role of Islamic religious counselors cannot be separated from the cultural characteristics and social structures within which policies are implemented (Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). In this context, the role of religious counselors as value mediators and social mentors carries a significance that may not always be found in more secular or individualistic educational systems. Evidence from the Religious Moderation policy and the Asta Priority Programs demonstrates that the strengthening of students' character in Indonesia is indeed constructed within a framework that integrates education with socio-religious life. This indicates that the findings of the study possess a strong culture-specific character. Therefore, the significance of these findings extends beyond general theoretical discussions and should be understood as a response to the distinctive needs of religious education within the Indonesian context.

Interpretatively, the finding concerning structural reinforcement through the Decree of the Director General Number 794 of 2025 may be understood as an indication of a shift from symbolic policy approaches toward implementation-oriented policy frameworks. This is significant because numerous policy studies have demonstrated that character education initiatives often remain confined to the normative level. In the present study, the emergence of technical regulations governing Islamic religious counselors reflects an effort to bridge the gap between policy objectives and implementation mechanisms. Critically, however, the findings also indicate that regulatory reinforcement does not automatically guarantee effective practice. The literature analyzed suggests the existence of potential obstacles related to institutional capacity, cross-sectoral coordination, and implementation readiness (Malin et al., 2020). Consequently, the causal relationship that can be drawn is that while the new regulation creates opportunities to strengthen the role of religious counselors, the realization of its intended impact ultimately depends on implementation factors. Therefore, the interpretation of these findings must remain critical and should not position regulation as a singular solution, but rather as a prerequisite that must be accompanied by broader systemic strengthening.

When connected to the theoretical frameworks of character education and Islamic guidance and counseling, the findings of this study suggest that Islamic religious counselors should not be viewed merely as complementary educational actors, but rather as essential mediators in the process of value internalization. This interpretation is significant because it shifts the perspective on religious counselors from an administrative approach toward a pedagogical-social approach. Conceptual evidence derived from Islamic educational theory,

which emphasizes exemplary conduct, habituation, and mentoring, demonstrates strong compatibility with the functions of religious counselors identified in this study (Zaki, 2025). From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the expansion of Islamic Guidance and Counseling studies by more explicitly incorporating the dimension of educational policy into the field of analysis. Therefore, the primary meaning of this study lies in the reconstruction of the understanding of Islamic religious counselors as integral components of the architecture of character education, rather than as external actors operating at the margins of the educational system.

When compared with previous studies, the findings of this research both confirm and extend earlier scholarship. Prior studies have generally emphasized the importance of Islamic religious counselors in community development and character education, and the present findings reaffirm this consensus (Huda, 2024). However, the novel contribution of this study lies in its incorporation of recent policy analysis, particularly the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, which has received limited attention in earlier research. The importance of this comparison lies in demonstrating that the novelty of the study does not emerge from contradicting previous findings, but rather from expanding the analytical horizon of the discussion. Comparative evidence indicates that earlier studies predominantly focused on the functional roles of religious counsellors (Aliani et al., 2023; Prihatini & Rustamaji, 2022), whereas this study adds structural and implementation-oriented policy dimensions to the analysis. Therefore, the contribution of this research lies in broadening the perspective of existing scholarship rather than merely reproducing earlier arguments.

The practical implications of the findings of this study point to the need for an action plan capable of bridging policy and implementation. Based on the findings, strengthening excellent and character-based education requires at least three strategic measures: the formal integration of Islamic religious counselors into the educational ecosystem (Sofyan et al., 2025), the enhancement of counselors' capacities through character education-oriented training (Bassar & Hasanah, 2020; Scheel et al., 2018), and the development of collaborative models involving educational institutions, families, and religious guidance structures (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Hadrayani et al., 2025). The importance of these proposals lies in the fact that the findings demonstrate that policy strength becomes effective only when translated into implementation-oriented designs (Rudolf & Grădinaru, 2019). Evidence from the analysis also indicates the existence of policy opportunities that enable such developments, particularly following the introduction of recent technical regulations. Nevertheless, this study remains limited because it is based on library analysis and does not empirically examine field implementation. However, precisely from this limitation emerges an agenda for future research aimed at testing the effectiveness of the integrative model proposed in this study. Therefore, the action plan derived from these findings extends

beyond normative recommendations by offering directions for practical transformation as well as a framework for future research agendas.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study demonstrates that strengthening excellent and character-based education within religious education does not solely depend on curricular design or pedagogical orientation, but also on the integration of socio-religious guidance actors and adequate policy support. The primary lesson that can be drawn from this study is that Islamic religious counselors occupy a far more strategic position than has commonly been understood, namely as integral components within the architecture of character education operating through value mentoring, social mediation, and the reinforcement of educational ecosystems. The significance of this finding lies in its ability to shift the prevailing perspective from viewing religious counselors as external actors toward understanding them as integral elements of excellent education. Evidence derived from the synthesis of literature and the analysis of the Asta Priority Programs, the Religious Moderation framework, and the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025 demonstrates a strong coherence among educational paradigms, the role of religious counselors, and the policy structures that support them. Therefore, the principal conclusion of this study is that the success of excellent and character-based education requires the simultaneous integration of educational concepts, implementing actors, and policy structures.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of an integrative perspective that brings together the fields of character education, Islamic Guidance and Counseling, and religious education policy analysis within a single conceptual framework. Theoretically, this study introduces a new dimension to Islamic counseling studies by demonstrating that the functions of Islamic religious counselors can be examined not only from the perspectives of da'wah and social development, but also through the lens of educational policy. Practically, this study contributes a conceptual model that may serve as a foundation for strengthening the role of religious counselors within the religious education system. Evidence of the study's strength can be observed in its use of recent regulations, particularly the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025, which provides an element of novelty that has received limited attention in previous scholarship. In addition, this study introduces implementation-oriented policy as an analytical variable that expands the discussion of character education from a purely pedagogical dimension toward the dimension of educational governance. Therefore, the strength of this study lies in its contribution to broadening scholarly horizons while simultaneously providing practical implications for the development of religious education policy.

Although this study produces significant conceptual contributions, several limitations must be openly acknowledged. The primary limitation lies in the use of a library research approach focused on document and literature analysis, which does not empirically examine how the roles of Islamic religious counselors are implemented across different educational institutional contexts. Recognizing this limitation is important in order to prevent excessive generalization of the findings. Evidence of these limitations can also be seen in the study's inability to accommodate variations in cases, such as differences among madrasas, schools, regional contexts, or the perspectives of students as subjects of education. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ field-based approaches, multi-site case studies, or mixed-method designs in order to test the effectiveness of the integrative model proposed in this study. In addition, future studies may expand their focus toward evaluating the practical implementation of the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance Number 794 of 2025. In conclusion, the limitations of this study simultaneously open new directions for the development of more comprehensive, contextual, and in-depth scholarship.

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