

**EXISTENTIALISM IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION:
EFFORTS TO FOSTER SELF-AWARENESS AND
RESPONSIBILITY AMONG STUDENTS AT SD
MUHAMMADIYAH 36 MEDAN**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the application of existentialist philosophical values in elementary education, particularly in efforts to foster self-awareness and responsibility among students at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan. Existentialist philosophy emphasizes individual freedom, self-awareness, and moral responsibility as the foundation for forming an authentic human existence. In the context of elementary education, these values are relevant for shaping students' character so they become aware of their existence and capable of taking responsibility for their actions. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The research subjects include the principal, classroom teachers, and students of SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan. The data were analyzed thematically through the processes of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the application of existentialist values at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan is reflected in learning practices that provide freedom of thought, opportunities for expression, and self-reflection on learning experiences. Teachers act as facilitators who guide students to understand the meaning of freedom and responsibility in each learning activity. In addition, routine activities such as cleanliness duty, congregational prayer, and the Anak Mandiri (Independent Child) program strengthen the development of students' moral and social responsibility. The existentialist values in this school are also integrated with Islamic teachings, ensuring that individual freedom remains aligned with spiritual responsibility toward God. This study shows that education grounded in existentialist values can shape students to become authentic, reflective, faithful, and responsible individuals. The integration of existentialism and Islamic values in the Muhammadiyah educational context creates a humanistic and spiritual educational model, in line with the goal of forming holistic human beings.

Keywords: Existentialism, Elementary Education, Self-Awareness, Responsibility, Muhammadiyah Elementary School

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a process that not only aims to transfer knowledge but also to shape students' personality, character, and self-awareness. At the elementary level, children are in a fundamental stage of development where they begin to build their identity, morality, and sense of responsibility. Therefore, elementary education serves as an essential foundation for forming whole individuals—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually (Tilaar, 2011).

In the context of contemporary education, existentialist thought continues to hold strong relevance. For example, research by Afryansyah, Ismail Sukardi, Mardiah Astuti, and Andre Bahrudin (2024) shows that the key principles of existentialist philosophy—freedom, self-awareness, and responsibility—are aligned with the characteristics of education in the digital era, particularly in encouraging students to become conscious individuals who make independent choices and take responsibility for their learning.

Furthermore, a study by Aditya Yoga Purnama et al. (2021) emphasizes that existentialist philosophy within the Indonesian educational context fosters students' "intensity of awareness" regarding their own existence and the responsibility for the life choices they make.

Thus, this study seeks to analyze and explore how existentialist values can be applied in elementary education at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan. The main focus is to examine the extent to which an existential approach can foster students' self-awareness and responsibility, as well as how teachers implement these principles in learning practices. It is expected that the findings of this research will enrich the discourse of Islamic educational philosophy and offer an alternative approach to character development for students at the elementary level.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. The Nature of Existentialist Philosophy

Existentialist philosophy is a school of thought that places human beings at the center of existence, emphasizing that individuals possess the freedom to determine the meaning of their lives through conscious choices and actions. Existentialism emerged as a reaction against deterministic views that regard humans merely as products of their environment or social systems (Akrim, A. (2023).

From an existentialist perspective, humans are not simply beings who are "created to become something," but rather beings who "exist first, and only then shape their own essence." This view underscores that every individual bears a moral responsibility to determine the direction of their life and to be accountable for every choice they make (Siregar, Nasution, & Syukri, 2025).

Modern existentialist thought is heavily influenced by figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard. Sartre emphasized that human existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals do not possess a fixed identity from the start but instead create it through their concrete actions. In other words, each person is fully responsible for shaping their own being (Cantika et al., 2024).

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, highlights the importance of self-awareness and authenticity as pathways for individuals to discover the meaning of life and develop spiritual closeness to God (Saputra et al., 2024). These two perspectives carry strong implications for the field of education, particularly in shaping individuals who are free, conscious, and responsible.

In the context of Indonesian education, existentialism is not understood as unlimited freedom, but rather as freedom grounded in moral and spiritual values. This aligns with the views of Purnama, Putri, and Saputri (2021), who emphasize that existentialist philosophy in Indonesia must be integrated with religious values so that individual freedom remains within the boundaries of ethics and social responsibility.

Thus, education oriented toward existentialism is expected to produce individuals who are aware of their existence as creations of God while also serving as members of society who contribute positively.

B. Principles of Existentialism in Education

In the field of education, existentialism emphasizes the importance of treating learners as subjects who possess awareness, freedom, and responsibility, rather than as mere recipients of knowledge. Teachers act as facilitators who help students discover meaning within the learning process, not simply as transmitters of information (Fanani, 2020).

Thus, education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge but a medium through which students can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their lives.

One of the main principles of existentialism is the freedom to choose. Students need to be given opportunities to determine their learning methods, select approaches that suit them, and understand the consequences of every decision they make. However, this freedom is not without limits, as each choice must be accompanied by moral responsibility toward oneself, others, and the environment. According to Oztürk (2023), in an existentialist-based learning environment, teachers encourage students to use their awareness reflectively—thinking about why they choose something and how it affects themselves and others.

In addition, the principle of authenticity is also essential in existentialist education. Authenticity refers to the courage of students to be themselves, not pretending or relying entirely on external judgments. Teachers who apply this approach help students recognize their personal values, strengths, and weaknesses without demanding uniformity. Learning becomes more meaningful because it is rooted in the students' own life experiences (Rumianowska, 2020).

C. Existentialism and Elementary Education

At the elementary education stage, children are in a crucial period of forming their identity and basic character. Therefore, education should not focus solely on academic knowledge but also on self-understanding, emotional regulation, and social responsibility. This is where the relevance of existentialism emerges: students are viewed as unique individuals with different potentials, and thus education must provide space for their existential development (Mechwafanitiara et al., 2024).

The application of existentialist values at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan can be carried out through various learning approaches. For example, teachers may provide students with opportunities to express opinions and choose their own ways of completing tasks, foster self-reflection after learning activities, and assign small responsibilities in school life, such as becoming a group leader or a class cleanliness monitor. Through these direct experiences, students learn that every choice carries consequences and that responsibility is an essential part of genuine freedom (Yahyaei & Mahini, 2017).

In addition, the principles of existentialism can be integrated with Islamic and Muhammadiyah values that emphasize the balance between freedom and morality. Freedom is not understood as unlimited desire, but as responsibility-based freedom before Allah. This makes existential education in Muhammadiyah schools both humanistic and spiritual, guiding students to recognize themselves as God's creatures as well as social beings who bear responsibility toward others (Rusdi, 2019).

D. Self-Awareness and Responsibility as Goals of Existentialist Education

Self-awareness and responsibility are two main dimensions in existentialism that are highly relevant to the goals of elementary education. Self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to understand themselves—their feelings, thoughts, and personal values—and to recognize their position in the world. Responsibility means the ability to bear the consequences of one's actions and decisions (Purnama et al., 2021).

In educational practice, fostering self-awareness can be carried out through reflective activities such as discussions, storytelling, or simple journaling that encourage students to express their experiences and feelings. Meanwhile, responsibility can be developed by assigning tasks appropriate to the child's developmental level, which require genuine involvement and consistency, such as maintaining cleanliness, keeping promises, or cooperating in groups. Such activities teach students that the freedom each individual possesses is always accompanied by responsibility for the outcomes of their actions (Qorib, M. (2022).

Thus, existentialist education at the elementary school level does not merely produce students who are intellectually capable, but also shapes individuals who are reflective, self-aware, and responsible toward themselves and their surroundings. This is the real form of education that humanizes humans (humanizing education)—an approach that is highly relevant in the modern educational era, which often becomes trapped in an orientation toward academic achievement alone.

E. The Relevance of Existentialism to the Goals of Muhammadiyah Education

Muhammadiyah education is founded on Islamic values that emphasize the development of individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and possess noble character. In this context, the principles of existentialism can serve as a philosophical foundation that strengthens this vision. Existentialism helps students understand their existence as God's creations who possess the freedom to choose their life path, yet whose freedom is bounded by moral and spiritual responsibilities. The integration of existential values with Islamic principles produces an educational approach that nurtures individuals who are intellectually independent while remaining obedient to divine values (Afryansyah et al., 2024).

Thus, the application of existentialist values at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan is not merely the adoption of Western philosophy, but the internalization of universal principles of awareness, freedom, and responsibility, harmonized with Islamic teachings. Through this approach, students can grow into individuals who are conscious of their existence, responsible for their choices, and able to find spiritual meaning in their daily lives.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of existentialist philosophical values in elementary education, particularly in fostering students' self-awareness and responsibility at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of educational practices, interactions, and meanings as they naturally occur within the school environment.

The research was conducted at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan, with participants consisting of the school principal, classroom teachers, and students. The principal and teachers were selected as key informants due to their strategic roles in planning and implementing learning activities and school programs, while students were involved as the primary subjects observed in the application of existentialist values in both classroom instruction and daily school routines.

Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. Observations were carried out during classroom learning processes and routine school activities, such as classroom cleanliness duties, congregational prayers, and the implementation of the Anak Mandiri (Independent Child) program. These observations aimed to identify how freedom of thought, opportunities for self-expression, reflective learning, and responsibility were manifested in students' behaviors and learning experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school principal and

classroom teachers to obtain deeper insights into their understanding, strategies, and experiences in applying existentialist values integrated with Islamic teachings. Documentation, including curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, school programs, photographs of activities, and other relevant records, was used to support and enrich the research data.

Data analysis was conducted thematically by following the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation were systematically selected, categorized, and organized into themes related to freedom, self-awareness, and responsibility. The analyzed data were then presented in narrative form to facilitate interpretation and the formulation of meaningful conclusions.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, triangulation was employed by comparing data obtained from different sources and data collection techniques. This process helped to validate the consistency and credibility of the findings, ensuring that the conclusions drawn accurately reflected the actual implementation of existentialist values within the educational context of SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan.

Result

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan, it was found that the application of existentialist values in the learning process has begun to emerge, particularly in the aspects of developing self-awareness, freedom of thought, and student responsibility.

Teachers at the school demonstrate an understanding that each child has different potentials and unique characteristics, so the learning approach is not standardized. entirely. In teaching and learning activities, teachers provide opportunities for students to express their opinions, choose their preferred learning methods, and actively engage in the learning process. For example, in thematic subjects, teachers often assign project-based activities that allow students to determine the form of their own output, whether in the form of posters, short dramas, or simple written work.

Observational findings indicate that the freedom given by teachers has a positive impact on students' confidence and initiative. Students become more open in expressing ideas, are not afraid of making mistakes, and show responsibility for their work. Several teachers also stated that students who are given space to express themselves tend to be more reflective and capable of understanding the moral values behind each activity they engage in.

In addition, there are deliberate efforts by the school to instill values of responsibility and discipline through daily activities such as cleanliness duty, congregational prayer, and the "Independent Child" program, which emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility. This program aims to ensure that students not only comply with rules but also understand the meaning behind the responsibilities they carry out.

However, the study also found several challenges in implementing existentialist values. Not all teachers have the same level of understanding of existentialist concepts, resulting in implementation that is sometimes limited to providing freedom without reflective guidance. Some students also still require assistance in connecting freedom with moral responsibility, especially lower-grade students who are not yet emotionally stable.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that the implementation of existentialist values at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan has begun to move toward strengthening aspects of self-awareness and responsibility as part of students' character development. These findings

align with Purnama et al. (2021), who state that existentialist education aims to cultivate reflective awareness in learners so that they are able to understand their existence and take responsibility for their choices.

From the perspective of existentialist philosophy, students are viewed not merely as objects of learning but as subjects who possess freedom and responsibility for their own existence. This aligns with the view of Jean-Paul Sartre, who asserts that humans must create the meaning of their own lives through conscious actions. In the context of elementary education, this principle is translated into learning that emphasizes active participation, freedom of expression, and self-reflection.

The implementation of these values can be seen in the practices of teachers at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan, who provide students with the freedom to choose the form of their learning activities. For example, in thematic project activities, students are given the freedom to determine how they will present their learning outcomes. This freedom helps students explore their interests and potentials, as emphasized by Oztürk (2023), who states that existentialist education fosters autonomous thinking that builds authentic personality in learners.

Furthermore, the principle of authenticity in existentialism is also reflected through the habituation of reflective activities at the school. Teachers often encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences by asking questions such as, “How did you feel during today’s lesson?” or “Why did you choose that method?” These reflective activities help students understand the reasons and meaning behind their actions, allowing deeper self-awareness to develop. This finding aligns with Rumianowska (2020), who states that the reflective process is key to shaping individuals who are aware of themselves and the meaning of their actions.

In terms of responsibility, the school demonstrates consistency in cultivating a culture of discipline and social awareness. The “Independent Child” program and daily classroom duties serve as platforms for building genuine responsibility. This is consistent with Afriansyah et al. (2024), who argue that implementing existentialist values in elementary education can be realized through direct experience rather than theoretical instruction alone. Through concrete activities, students learn that every freedom must be balanced with responsibility.

In addition, the implementation of existentialism at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan strongly aligns with Islamic values and the philosophy of Muhammadiyah education. Individual freedom is balanced by spiritual awareness that every action will be accounted for before Allah. Thus, existentialism in this context not only shapes free individuals but also individuals who are faithful, ethical, and responsible. This reinforces the findings of Rusdi (2019), who states that the application of existentialist philosophy in Islamic education can create a balance between existential freedom and divine moral values. However, the findings also indicate the need to improve teachers’ capacity in understanding existentialist philosophy so that its implementation does not merely grant freedom but also guides students to reflect and understand the meaning behind that freedom. As Fanani (2020) reminds us, existentialist education without moral direction risks turning freedom into confusion rather than awareness.

Thus, this study confirms that the implementation of existentialist values at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan has been progressing well, although it still requires strengthening in the areas of self-reflection and teacher guidance. The values of freedom, self-awareness, and responsibility—central to existentialism—have been shown to be integrable with Islamic values, thereby creating a model of elementary education that humanizes learners while also bringing them closer to spiritual and moral principles.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study and the discussion conducted, it can be concluded that the application of existentialist philosophical values in elementary education at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan provides a significant contribution to the development of students' self-awareness and responsibility.

First, the implementation of existentialist principles in the school is reflected through the provision of freedom of thought and action for students in the learning process. Teachers act as facilitators who encourage students to actively explore ideas, express opinions, and make decisions in learning activities. This aligns with the existentialist principle that humans are beings who are free and responsible for the choices they make in life.

Second, the value of self-awareness is cultivated through reflective activities, discussions, and personal guidance. Students are encouraged to understand the reasons behind each action and connect them with moral and spiritual values. Through this process, students not only learn academic content but also get to know themselves, their potential, and their roles in social and religious life.

Third, the aspect of responsibility develops through routine activities such as classroom cleaning duties, congregational prayer, and the "Independent Child" program, which instills a sense of responsibility toward oneself, the environment, and others. Students learn that the freedom they possess is always accompanied by moral and social consequences.

Fourth, the integration of existentialist values with Islamic teachings within the Muhammadiyah education system creates a balance between individual freedom and spiritual responsibility. Education not only humanizes individuals intellectually but also shapes personalities that are faithful, virtuous, and aware of their existence before God.

Thus, the implementation of existentialism at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan demonstrates that humanistic education can be aligned with Islamic values. Existentialist education in this context is capable of nurturing students who are authentic, reflective, responsible, and spiritually self-aware.

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