Religious literacy for strengthening identity and solidarity of the Cham Muslim Community in Cambodia

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Abstract

Background of the study: The Cham Muslim community in Roka Po Pram, Cambodia, faces structural barriers in preserving their religious identity due to the dominance of Theravada Buddhism, lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate religious education infrastructure.

Purpose: This study aims to enhance religious literacy and reinforce the community's cultural and social identity through a participatory model.

Method: A Community-Based Research (CBR) approach was applied in four stages: foundation, planning, data collection, and action. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations involving teachers, parents, youth, and local leaders.

Findings: The results revealed increased community engagement, improved teaching capacity through local training initiatives, and the effective use of digital tools like WhatsApp and YouTube to support religious learning. Dialogical spaces were also created to foster social cohesion.

Conclusion: Religious literacy, developed through contextual and dialogical methods, serves not only as knowledge transmission but also as a strategic tool for minority empowerment and cultural preservation. The model offers a replicable framework for other marginalized groups.

Keywords: Religious Literacy, Cham Muslims, Community-Based Research (CBR), Cultural Identity, Cambodia, Minority Empowerment

Introduction

Religious literacy has become an essential competency in the modern era, linking religious understanding with broader social, political, and cultural dimensions (Fatihah & Rohimi, 2024). It extends beyond basic doctrinal knowledge to encompass the analytical capacity to interpret how religion shapes and is shaped by complex historical and sociocultural contexts (Moore, 2015; Rahmah et al., 2024; Hall, 2018). Within minority contexts, religious literacy is a foundational element for fostering social cohesion and preserving cultural identity (Ridho, 2024; Zaky et al., 2024; Lubis, 2024). This is particularly relevant for the Cham Muslim community in Cambodia, who face systemic challenges in maintaining their religious identity amid the dominance of Theravada Buddhism. Kampong Roka Po Pram, a Cham Muslim enclave in Cambodia with an estimated population of 27,161, exemplifies these challenges. Geographic isolation, economic hardship, and limited institutional support have significantly restricted access to religious education. High poverty levels compel approximately 20% of school-aged Muslim children to work, thereby limiting their participation in formal and religious schooling (Cantika, 2022; Lestari, 2015). Although the community is legally permitted to establish mosques and madrasas, government support remains minimal. The region has only one or two functioning Islamic schools with a small number of teachers, many of whom lack formal pedagogical training.

Religious education in this community is heavily dependent on external aid from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. While such assistance is beneficial, it underscores the lack of sustainable, state-supported infrastructure and creates reliance on non-contextualized curricula and teaching methods. This dependency may open the door to transnational religious ideologies that are misaligned with local cultural realities and, in some cases, pose risks to social cohesion ((Iqra, 2022). However, existing literature on Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia has not sufficiently explored how religious literacy can be developed through participatory, community-based models that center local agency and cultural context. This study addresses that gap by integrating Habermas' theory of the public sphere within a Community-Based Research (CBR) framework, enabling religious literacy to function not only as knowledge transmission but as a dialogical and emancipatory tool for identity formation and social cohesion.

To address these challenges, this study employed a Community-Based Research (CBR) approach that actively engages the Cham Muslim community in identifying their needs, mapping challenges, and co-developing strategies to enhance religious literacy. CBR creates a participatory space in which community members are empowered to articulate their priorities, raise collective awareness, and co-construct contextually relevant and sustainable solutions. This approach is grounded in Habermas' public sphere theory, which underscores the importance of inclusive dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and collective agency. Rather than being passive recipients of aid, the Cham Muslim community is positioned as active agents of change participating equally in the identification of problems and the design of interventions. Through dialogical engagement, the community not only deepens its understanding of religious teachings but also cultivates a stronger sense of identity as a social group with rights and responsibilities to shape its future. Within this framework, religious literacy extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge to function as a tool for cultural affirmation and social cohesion in the face of dominant cultural pressures. This participatory process enables the community to preserve its religious and cultural values while remaining adaptable to the demands of modernization. With the Cham Muslim population in Cambodia estimated at around 800 individuals in 2020, and with youth comprising a significant demographic, there exists considerable potential for advancing a progressive, context-sensitive model of Islamic education (Henri, 2020). The CBR approach thus facilitates the development

of religious literacy not only as an educational goal, but as a strategic platform for enhancing inclusion, resilience, and solidarity particularly in communities with limited access to formal religious instruction. Importantly, the outcomes of this approach demonstrate its replicability for other marginalized minority groups facing similar educational and cultural preservation challenges. The CBR model offers a pragmatic and empowering framework for integrating religious literacy with community development and identity formation in pluralistic societies.

Furthermore, religius literacy when viewed through Habermas' theory of the public sphere empowers communities to develop critical awareness of the socio-political structures that influence their lives. The dialogic space created through the CBR process provides the Cham Muslim community with opportunities to engage in internal discourse, strengthen mutual understanding, and co-design strategies that support a sustainable future for subsequent generations. Meaningful participation, particularly by the youth, is expected to generate long-term impacts on religious understanding, educational independence, and overall quality of life (Ahadi & Sugiarto, 2025). In this regard, the CBR approach provides a robust foundation for building inclusive, resilient, and harmonious communities in the face of globalizing pressures. Religious literacy, therefore, should be conceptualized not merely as an educational tool, but as a platform for sustaining social bonds, reinforcing solidarity, and preserving cultural identity (Dawam, 2024). It enables communities to uphold their religious traditions while remaining responsive to the demands and disruptions of modernization (Saini, 2024; Utami et al., 2024)). For minority populations such as the Cham Muslims in Cambodia, a CBR-based religious literacy model enhances community resilience, cultivates social inclusion, and supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. In the context of Roka Po Pram, increasing religious literacy through participatory CBR methods constitutes a practical and context-appropriate solution. It addresses the limitations in access to formal religious education, strengthens communal cohesion, and promotes inclusive development. In light of this, the present study seeks to explore: (1) how religious education is perceived and practiced by key actors in Roka Po Pram; and (2) how participatory strategies can be leveraged to strengthen religious literacy and communal identity.

Literature Review

Religious literacy has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how minority communities navigate identity formation and social cohesion within pluralistic societies. In Southeast Asia, where religious and ethnic diversity is highly pronounced, religious literacy functions not merely as doctrinal knowledge but as a transformative capability to critically and contextually engage with religious teachings amidst sociopolitical challenges (Dawam, 2024; Nikmah, 2023). Scholars argue that Islamic education in multicultural societies must foster inclusivity to counter radicalism and promote civic harmony. (Raihani, 2017) and (Abidin et al., 2025) emphasizes that Islamic education must be contextualized to support tolerance, while (Reid, 2015) highlights the historical tension between religious pluralism and conformity in Southeast Asia's cultural legacy. Several studies underscore the intersection of religious education and nation-building. (Satibi et al., 2022) demonstrate that Islamic institutions in conflict-prone areas like Aceh and Pattani serve to preserve ethnic identity and promote peaceful coexistence. This aligns with (Wekke's, 2020) findings that educational reforms in Muslim minority madrasas in Thailand empower marginalized communities through curriculum innovation and administrative autonomy. Similarly, (Mala et al., 2022) identify the pivotal role of government policy in institutionalizing religious tolerance practices.

International perspectives further strengthen the argument for embedding religious literacy into formal education systems. (Chan et al., 2024) analyze Quebec's social studies curriculum, revealing that the integration of religious literacy fosters inclusivity and mutual

respect. Meanwhile, (Eskelinen et al., 2022) highlights how national and religious identification shape public support for religious minority rights, indicating a complex relationship between state, religion, and minority advocacy. Scholars studying Muslim diasporas in Europe and the West have also emphasized how religious identity and literacy intersect with broader issues of integration, belonging, and resilience. For example, (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018) found that religious identity among Muslim youth in Europe can either hinder or support civic inclusion depending on institutional context. (Ghatas, 2023) further emphasizes the importance of intergenerational transmission of religious values in maintaining identity within Western diasporic Muslim communities. (Hussein, 2021) documents how Egyptian Muslim students in Europe negotiate their religious identity within secular environments, stressing the role of informal learning spaces. Although these studies are situated outside Southeast Asia, they offer valuable theoretical parallels. particularly the role of youth agency and community-based religious learning in sustaining identity amid marginalization. This resonates with findings from (Essid, 2020) and (Habti, 2014) who argue that the school-family-community triad is critical for minority Muslim resilience. These insights can be transposed to the Cambodian context, where formal state support is weak, and localized, dialogic approaches are crucial.

Studies on Southeast Asian Muslim minorities often under-explore participatory models for enhancing religious literacy that reflect grassroots realities. (Ahadi & Sugiarto, 2025) advocate for education models grounded in multicultural awareness to strengthen youth resilience in digital contexts. (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024) call for Islamic education reforms that harmonize local culture with religious values. Likewise, digital tools are increasingly seen as effective alternatives for marginalized groups (Lisyawati et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2024). In diasporic communities in Asia, such as Indonesian Muslims in South Korea or Australia, community-based learning has become the default mechanism for religious transmission, often centered on digital media and volunteer-led programs (Srimulyani, 2021; Toyibah et al., 2025). These patterns echo current practices in the Cham Muslim community in Cambodia and justify the relevance of a Community-Based Research (CBR) framework. Community engagement is also pivotal. (Wibowo & Belia, 2023) affirm that community-led religious literacy programs enhance knowledge retention while strengthening social networks and group solidarity. Early interventions also prove effective; (Sakti et al., 2024) demonstrate that creative, interactive methods introduced during childhood contribute significantly to value internalization and cultural preservation. However, few empirical studies integrate participatory methodologies with critical theories such as Habermas' public sphere to operationalize religious literacy as both an educational tool and a vehicle for emancipation. This study addresses that gap by proposing and analyzing a CBR-based religious literacy model specifically designed for the Cham Muslim minority in Cambodia, bridging theoretical frameworks with locally grounded strategies for resilience and identity formation.

Method
Research Design
This study employed a Community-Based Research (CBR) design, a participatory approach that emphasizes collaboration between researchers and community members in identifying problems and designing solutions. CBR is part of the action research paradigm, where knowledge generation and social action are integrated to produce transformative outcomes. It aligns with the principles of service learning and social justice by actively involving community stakeholders throughout the research process, from planning and data collection to analysis and implementation of interventions.

Research Location

The study was conducted in Roka Po Pram Village, located in Tbong Khmum Province, Cambodia. This rural area is predominantly inhabited by the Cham Muslim minority. The village is characterized by limited access to educational infrastructure and religious resources, making it a suitable site for exploring the impact of religious literacy on cultural identity and social solidarity.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprised members of the Cham Muslim community in Roka Po Pram, including: 1) Community leaders, 2) Village heads, 3) Religious teachers (ustadz/ustadzah), 4) Parents of school-aged children, and 5) Youth participants engaged in religious activities. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who have substantial engagement with religious education and community development. In total, 32 participants were involved, representing diverse roles within the community to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the religious literacy landscape.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and depth of insight:
  a. In-depth semi-structured interviews with religious teachers, parents, and community leaders.
  b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving local stakeholders to identify key needs, constraints, and expectations.
  c. Participatory observations of religious education activities, prayer gatherings, and community events.

All interactions were conducted with the aid of local translators and facilitators fluent in Khmer and Cham dialects, ensuring contextual sensitivity and cultural appropriateness. Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics board, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

A participatory descriptive analysis was applied. The analytical process followed these stages:
  a. Transcription of field data and translation into English for uniformity in interpretation.
  b. Thematic coding of data based on emergent categories: access to education, teaching quality, community perceptions, and solidarity indicators.
  c. Community validation workshops were conducted to ensure interpretive accuracy and co-creation of meaning from the findings.

The analysis also integrated theoretical frameworks from Habermas' Public Sphere theory to understand how participatory dialogue strengthens collective identity and social cohesion within marginalized communities.

Result and Discussion

The research was conducted in Kampong Cham, Cambodia, where the majority of the population comprises ethnic Cham Muslims. Despite their long-standing presence, this community continues to experience systemic discrimination and socio-economic marginalization. One of the key factors hindering the preservation of their identity and cultural continuity is the low level of religious literacy (Anatasya et al., 2024; Aini, 2024). Religious knowledge and practice serve not only as doctrinal tools but as integral elements of group identity and collective resilience (Danielle Keeton-Olsen & Meta, 2020; Brickell & Springer,

2017). Roka Po Pram Village, located in Tbong Khmum Province, exemplifies these challenges. The village consists of several sub-communities, including Chong Ou, Veal Vong, and Chant Nimitt. According to the 2019 national census, the total population in the area is approximately 27,161, with a slight female majority (14,242 women to 12,919 men). As a rural and agriculturally driven region, Roka Po Pram lacks critical infrastructure including access to religious education and formal educational institutions which significantly limits the community's capacity to foster religious literacy (City Population, 2019; Maula et al., 2023).

Within this context, the Cham Muslims in Cambodia represent one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in the nation. Their marginalization is compounded by the religious dynamics of a Buddhist-majority society, in which they struggle to access equitable religious and educational resources. This study therefore adopted a Community-Based Research (CBR) framework to diagnose the specific challenges and identify strategic interventions for enhancing religious literacy among Cham Muslims in Roka Po Pram. CBR is particularly appropriate for working with marginalized populations, as it emphasizes collaborative knowledge creation, localized empowerment, and participatory problem-solving (McTaggart, 1997; Andyarini et al., 2022). Rather than treating the community as passive research subjects, the CBR model positions them as active collaborators—identifying needs, co-producing knowledge, and taking collective action. Data collection involved multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with community leaders, religious educators, parents, and youth. Analysis followed grounded theory methodology through three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Recurring patterns from participant narratives were synthesized into second-order categories, which were then organized into broader aggregate dimensions to capture key aspects of religious literacy development within the community.

The coding process yielded three principal thematic dimensions: (1) structural challenges in religious education, (2) community-based innovations in literacy practices, and (3) participatory learning processes that foster social cohesion. These dimensions emerged through systematic analysis of field data and reflect the multifaceted experiences of the Cham Muslim community in developing and sustaining religious literacy. Table 1 outlines the thematic coding framework, showing the hierarchical organization of first-order concepts (empirical codes) into second-order interpretive themes, and subsequently into aggregate dimensions. This structure enables a clear interpretation of how grassroots insights translated into actionable categories for analysis.

Tabel 1. Thematic Coding Framework

1nd-Order Themes	2nd-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"We only have one religious teacher for many children."	Limited Human Resource Capacity	Structural Challenges in Religious Education
"Most of the curriculum comes from Indonesia or Malaysia."	Inadequate Educational Infrastructure	
"My son only learns religion from me at home."	Non-institutionalized Religious Learning	
"We use WhatsApp to share religious lessons."	Use of Technology in Teaching	Community-based Innovation in Literacy Practices
"We trained a youth volunteer to teach the children."	Localized Educational Empowerment	

"Children like to watch Islamic videos on YouTube."	Contextual Media Adoption	
"We meet once a week to read and discuss."	Collective Learning and Identity Formation	Participatory Learning and Social Cohesion
"We must stay together to keep our religion strong."	Shared Religious Values and Unity	
"Youth are the key to continuing our religion."	Intergenerational Identity Transmission	

Each dimension is explored in the following subsections, supported by field narratives and cross-referenced with relevant theoretical and empirical literature. This analytical structure not only contextualizes the lived experiences of the Cham Muslims in Roka Po Pram but also provides a framework for replicable interventions in similarly marginalized communities.

A problem-tree analysis in the initial CBR phase revealed that religious instruction in Roka Po Pram occurs largely through informal, family-based channels due to severe shortages of qualified teachers and teaching materials. Geographic isolation further impedes connections with urban Islamic education centers. As (Nikmah, 2023) defines, religious literacy transcends basic scriptural reading to encompass critical, contextual interpretation and application of teachings. In Roka Po Pram, the absence of "public spaces" for free and equal dialogue as conceptualized by Habermas (1989) means that collective discussions on faith, identity, and practice are virtually nonexistent. This dual deficit of resources and discursive forums undermines both the technical and communal dimensions of religious literacy, weakening the community's capacity to form a resilient, shared Muslim identity.

Structural Challenges in Religious Education
One of the most pressing challenges faced by the Cham Muslim community in Roka Po Pram is the acute shortage of qualified religious educators. This shortage directly impacts the community's ability to sustain structured and consistent religious instruction. As one teacher lamented, "We only have one religious teacher for many children. I cannot reach them all." The burden placed on this limited pool of instructors leads to fragmented learning, with many children relying instead on informal instruction from parents who often lack formal pedagogical training. The inadequacy of institutional support extends beyond human resources to include the absence of localized teaching materials. Religious curricula are typically imported from other ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, which—while well-intentioned do not always align with the socio-cultural realities of Cambodian Cham Muslims. A local village leader expressed concern: "Most of the curriculum comes from Indonesia or Malaysia. We don't know if it fits our life here." These imported materials, although doctrinally valid, often overlook the contextual nuances required for effective religious engagement within this community. Moreover, many families have no access to formal madrasas. In such cases, religious education becomes a familial responsibility, frequently unstructured and dependent on the parents' own level of knowledge. As one mother stated, "My son only learns religion from me at home." This reliance on informal learning environments reflects a broader structural issue: the absence of institutional pathways for comprehensive religious literacy development. Financial constraints further compound these challenges. Religious instructors in Roka Po Pram receive no state support and are instead reliant on local zakat contributions and intermittent donations from foreign NGOs. This unstable funding base hinders long-term planning and the development of professional teaching standards. The vulnerability of such systems is consistent with findings from (Danielle Keeton-Olsen & Meta, 2020), who emphasizes the critical role of

sustained external engagement and governmental recognition in safeguarding minority religious education. Taken together, these structural limitations highlight a broader systemic neglect of religious education in marginalized communities. Without appropriate infrastructure, qualified educators, and culturally relevant curricula, the community's ability to transmit religious knowledge and identity to the next generation remains significantly constrained. These findings align with (Aboobacker & Aziz, M. A, 2018) and (Nikmah, 2023), who argue that minority groups require not only freedom of religion but also equitable access to high-quality religious education in order to preserve their cultural identity and social cohesion.

Community-Based Innovation in Literacy Practices

Despite structural limitations, the Cham Muslim community in Roka Po Pram has demonstrated remarkable agency in innovating locally adapted strategies for religious literacy development. In response to the limited availability of formal instruction, community members have turned to mobile technologies as accessible and affordable alternatives for religious education. A youth volunteer shared, "We use WhatsApp to share religious lessons and videos. It helps especially during the planting season when people are busy." These grassroots solutions reflect a creative use of digital media to bridge educational gaps, especially during periods when in-person gatherings are difficult. Such innovations are consistent with findings by (Lisyawati et al., 2023) who argue that digital tools—when contextualized to local realities—can significantly enhance the reach and relevance of religious instruction in underserved communities. In Roka Po Pram, these tools not only support learning but also foster communal interaction through shared digital content, creating informal yet impactful learning networks. Another notable initiative is the training of youth volunteers to serve as informal religious instructors. As reported by a parent: "We trained a youth volunteer to teach the children after Maghrib prayer." This reflects a deliberate effort by the community to cultivate internal educational capacity and reduce dependency on external instructors. This strategy aligns with (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024). who advocate for localized capacity-building as a pathway toward sustainable religious education in minority settings. In addition to messaging platforms, the community also embraces video-sharing platforms such as YouTube to access child-friendly Islamic content. "Children like to watch Islamic videos on YouTube," remarked one parent. This demonstrates both a growing digital literacy and a shift toward visual and audiovisual pedagogies, particularly effective for engaging younger learners. Although informal, these practices represent a form of contextual religious pedagogy that resonates with the interests and routines of the community's youth. This process of innovation emerging from necessity rather than formal policy echoes Freire's (1970) concept of education as liberation. Rather than being passive consumers of externally imposed curricula, the Cham Muslims of Roka Po Pram co-create their own learning ecosystems, rooted in lived experience and collective need. Through reflection, adaptation, and participation, religious literacy becomes not merely a tool for knowledge transfer but a dynamic mechanism for reclaiming identity and building communal resilience. These community-led adaptations underscore the potential of participatory educational models to empower marginalized groups. They also demonstrate that, even in resource-scarce contexts, culturally relevant and technologically enabled religious education can be developed and sustained when communities are given the agency to innovate from within.

Participatory Learning and Social Cohesion

The third thematic dimension highlights how participatory learning processes contribute to the reinforcement of social cohesion and the formation of collective religious identity within the Cham Muslim community. In the absence of formal religious institutions, communal

learning initiatives have emerged as vital platforms for shared reflection and solidarity-building. One mother described: "We meet once a week to read and discuss religion together with other families." These gatherings serve as dialogical spaces akin to Habermas' concept of the public sphere where participants co-construct meaning, reinforce shared values, and nurture a sense of collective belonging. These practices are especially valuable in environments where external sociocultural pressures threaten minority identity. Through group learning, the community not only preserves religious knowledge but also affirms its social integrity. Religious literacy, in this context, functions as a mechanism for cultivating mutual trust and sustaining intergenerational cultural continuity. One community elder emphasized: "Youth are the key to continuing our religion and identity." This statement reflects a strong awareness of the role that young people play in ensuring the longevity of religious and cultural traditions in the face of modernizing forces. This intergenerational approach resonates with the findings of (Ahadi & Sugiarto, 2025), who argue that youth-centered religious education in multicultural societies fosters resilience, strengthens identity, and promotes inclusive civic engagement. In Roka Po Pram, youth volunteers are not only recipients of education but also active facilitators in the community's religious ecosystem. This dynamic role reversal reflects Paulo Freire's (1970) model of dialogical education, where learners become co-educators in a reciprocal process of empowerment and transformation. Furthermore, the process of collective learning enables the community to construct shared narratives and negotiate their religious identity in relation to broader social structures. This aligns with (Maria & Salamah, 2022), who emphasize that religious literacy among youth is most effective when it involves critical discussion and is embedded in communal values. To operationalize these insights, the CBR initiative developed a "tree of hope" framework based on three strategic pillars: (1) strengthening religious education infrastructure, (2) co-developing culturally relevant teaching materials, and (3) initiating policy advocacy with local authorities. Key interventions included teacher training workshops, the creation of context-sensitive digital modules, and the establishment of weekly study circles for families. These initiatives have yielded early positive outcomes, including increased community participation, heightened confidence among volunteer instructors, and a clearer roadmap for sustained collaboration with local stakeholders. In this participatory framework, religious literacy evolves from a didactic process into a transformative community enterprise—enhancing social bonds, promoting cultural resilience, and enabling marginalized groups to articulate their identity and aspirations in pluralistic settings.

Synthesis and Implications

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role of religious literacy as both an educational tool and a socio-cultural instrument for identity preservation, especially within marginalized communities such as the Cham Muslims of Roka Po Pram. Synthesizing the three thematic dimensions structural challenges, community-based innovation, and participatory learning reveals that religious literacy, when approached through a Community-Based Research (CBR) lens, can serve as a catalyst for empowerment, resilience, and inclusion. First, the recognition of structural challenges reinforces the need for systemic reforms that ensure equitable access to quality religious education. Without state-supported infrastructure, the sustainability of Islamic education in minority contexts remains precarious. Addressing this requires not only material investment but also policy frameworks that affirm the rights of religious minorities to contextually relevant education. Second, the community's adaptive strategies—such as leveraging digital media and youth-led teaching models illustrate that innovation can emerge organically from within marginalized settings when communities are empowered to respond to their own needs. These locally driven initiatives challenge the dominant paradigm of top-down educational reform and instead promote models of learning

that are rooted in cultural authenticity and everyday lived experience. Third, the participatory learning processes fostered through the CBR approach demonstrate the transformative potential of collective dialogue in enhancing social cohesion and intergenerational continuity. In this framework, religious literacy is not merely transmitted but co-produced through shared engagement, reflection, and agency. Such practices strengthen communal bonds and foster a sense of ownership over cultural and religious identity. These insights have significant implications for broader academic and policy discourse. The study contributes to current scholarship by providing an empirically grounded model for religious literacy development in minority settings that bridges theory and practice. Moreover, it highlights the importance of participatory methodologies in designing inclusive education that aligns with the sociocultural realities of the target population. Practically, the CBR-based model presented in this study offers a replicable framework for community-led religious education in other marginalized contexts. By centering the voices and agency of local actors, the model affirms that sustainable solutions are best cultivated when communities are treated not as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of knowledge and change. In conclusion, religious literacy, when embedded within participatory, culturally contextualized frameworks, has the power to strengthen identity, foster resilience, and promote inclusive development. This underscores the urgency for stakeholders—including policymakers, educators, and religious leaders—to adopt bottom-up approaches that honor local knowledge, support grassroots innovation, and invest in the collective futures of minority communities.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that enhancing religious literacy through a Community-Based Research (CBR) approach is both feasible and impactful in marginalized contexts such as the Cham Muslim community of Roka Po Pram, Cambodia. Confronted with limited access to formal religious education, infrastructural deficits, and minimal governmental support, the community responded by initiating participatory strategies that not only addressed immediate educational needs but also fostered long-term cultural resilience and social cohesion. By involving religious teachers, parents, youth, and community leaders in all phases of the research from problem identification to intervention design the study emphasized the value of local knowledge and community ownership. Interventions such as digital content development, youth-led instruction, and weekly study circles proved to be contextually appropriate and sustainable. These initiatives contributed to improved community participation, enhanced pedagogical capacity, and increased awareness of religious identity as a source of collective strength. The integration of Habermas' public sphere theory and Freire's concept of dialogical education further enriched the process, enabling community members to act not merely as recipients of knowledge but as critical agents in shaping their educational future. The findings confirm that religious literacy, when cultivated through inclusive and dialogic processes, functions as a tool for cultural preservation, social inclusion, and empowerment. This research contributes to the broader discourse on minority education by presenting a replicable model for grassroots religious education that aligns with local values while fostering adaptability in the face of modernization. It calls on policymakers, educators, and civil society actors to recognize and support such participatory frameworks as viable strategies for educational equity and cultural sustainability. Ultimately, this study affirms that religious literacy is not only about the transmission of beliefs, but about enabling communities to articulate their identity, negotiate their place in society, and build a cohesive, inclusive, and resilient future.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed to the final manuscript. The contribution of all authors: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing original draft preparation, writing review, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

All authors have no conflict of interest related to this study.

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