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MANAGEMENT OF BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS EDUCATION; CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING THE EXISTENCE OF DHAMMASEKHA SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the strategy in maintaining the existence of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school in Jepara Regency. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study at Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna School, Jepara Regency. Informants consist of the Head of the Foundation, the principal, teachers, education staff, community leader and representative of the student's parents. Data collection uses observation, interviews, and document studies. Data validity is in the form of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Data analysis uses an interactive model. The challenges in maintaining the existence of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school can be seen from three current challenges such as; 1) The brand and image of the Dhammasekha school which is not yet strong in the community, 2) Limited segmentation and market, 3) Support from the community and stakeholders which is not yet optimal. This research will be useful for the Government, especially Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nava Dhammasekha School Organizers and Education Observers.

Keywords: Educational Management, Religious Education, Existence of Dhammasekha School

I. INTRODUCTION

Religious educational institutions play a strategic role in preserving and instilling spiritual, moral, and national character values; therefore, their existence must be maintained amid the increasingly intense competition among similar educational institutions. In the current era of educational competition marked by the rapid growth of both formal and non-formal institutions religious schools are expected not only to sustain their religious functions but also to innovate in management, curriculum design, and educational services to remain relevant and appealing to society. Heightened competition can reduce students' interest in institutions that fail to adapt, making it essential to strengthen governance, improve the quality of educators, and modernize learning systems to ensure the continued existence of religious education. The increasing number of educational institutions has led to a rise in competitiveness, encouraging institutions to innovate and enhance service quality (Teegelbeckers et al., 2023). Likewise, the growth of new educational institutions significantly influences the existence and quality of others, as it creates competitive dynamics in attracting students (Cartagena Farías & McIntosh, 2019). Thus, maintaining the sustainability of religious educational institutions means ensuring their vital role as moral fortresses and centers for character development continues to thrive and remain competitive amid the currents of educational competition.

The existence of an educational institution is a necessity amid the competition among schools. The sustainability of an institution is greatly influenced by how effectively it manages its available resources to support its development. The continuity and existence of an educational institution depend largely on the management practices implemented to foster innovation in the face of challenges and competition with other institutions. The same applies to religious educational institutions, which continue to experience growth in both quality and quantity across various educational levels. The existence of an educational institution can be influenced by multiple factors, such as effective,

collaborative, and sustainability-oriented leadership from the principal, which plays a crucial role in maintaining the school's vitality. A principal who can cultivate a positive organizational culture encourages innovation, participation, and long-term sustainability (Carr, 2016).

Religious educational institutions, particularly Buddhist religious schools, must also preserve their existence amid the growth and competition among other educational institutions. One formal Buddhist religious education institution currently being developed is the *Dhammasekha* school, which aims to enhance educational services and access, especially for Buddhist communities. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs Number 27 of 2024 concerning Buddhist Religious Education, *Dhammasekha* is a formal Buddhist religious education unit established within the formal education pathway. Furthermore, the regulation specifies that the *Dhammasekha* curriculum consists of both Buddhist religious education and general education curricula. The growth and development of educational institutions will inevitably trigger competition among them, potentially affecting student enrollment and institutional sustainability. Therefore, educational institutions must adapt to survive; schools must redefine their identity and adjust their approach to religious education and curriculum to remain relevant and competitive (Fontdevila et al., 2024).

Dhammasekha schools are formal educational institutions expected to provide broader educational services and access within society, particularly for Buddhist communities. The development and existence of *Dhammasekha* institutions possess distinctive characteristics compared to other religious educational institutions. To grow and maintain their existence, educational institutions must demonstrate high-quality educational services, foster a positive school environment, encourage community involvement, promote innovation and adaptability to change, and possess sound financial management (Carbach & Fischer, 2017; Mihăescu, 2020; Scott,

2013). The challenges in operating *Dhammasekha* schools include the need for more extensive dissemination of regulations to education providers, building public trust and improving the perception of the quality and services of *Dhammasekha* schools, ensuring the availability of adequate resources, and addressing the limited target market for *Dhammasekha* education, which remains relatively narrow.

The growth and development of *Dhammasekha* schools as formal institutions within the framework of Buddhist religious education present an interesting picture to observe. Until recently, formal education widely recognized within Buddhist religious institutions has primarily existed at the higher education level. Therefore, *Dhammasekha* schools deserve greater attention in their development, especially considering that similar educational institutions at the early childhood and primary levels have long existed in other religions, such as *Pasraman* in Hinduism, *Raudhatul Athfal (RA)* and *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI)* in Islam, as well as other comparable institutions.

If viewed from the official account of Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance, Ministry of Religious Affairs related to the distribution of *Dhammasekha* Schools, it can be seen that the existing *dhammasekha* schools are Nava *Dhammasekha* and Mula *Dhammasekha*. The following is the distribution of *Dhammasekha* schools in Indonesia;

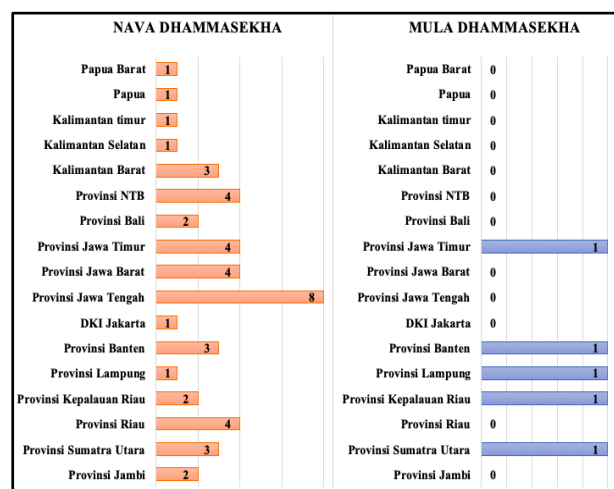


Figure 1.1 Distribution of *Dhammasekha* Schools
Source: Instagram Ditjenbimasbuddha

Looking at the data distribution in Figure 1.1 shows that there has been a quantitative development at *Dhammasekha* School in recent years, especially Nava *Dhammasekha* School. Nava *Dhammasekha* School has grown quantitatively compared to other Nava *Dhammasekha* schools. The dominance of Nava *Dhammasekha*'s growth is an interesting phenomenon to see further how Nava *Dhammasekha* can grow and exist amidst the various challenges that arise. Nava *Dhammasekha* Virya Guna School is one of the *Dhammasekha* schools founded in 2022 whose development has also experienced various challenges in order to exist as a formal religious-based educational institution. Based on the results of a preliminary study conducted by the school management, various challenges were faced, such as the image of the *Dhammasekha* school which had not been formed strongly, the participation of the community and stakeholders which had not been maximized, and other challenges that could disrupt the existence of the Nava *Dhammasekha* school. These various challenges need to be the focus of the management of the Nava *Dhammasekha* Education institution so that the implementation of *Dhammasekha* continues to develop and exist in providing educational services, especially at the early childhood education level.

II. METHOD

This study was conducted to describe how the management of the Buddhist Religious Education Institution, Nava *Dhammasekha* Virya Guna School, implemented a strategy to strengthen the existence of its educational institution so that it can continue to grow and exist amidst the competition for the growth of similar educational institutions. This study uses a case study method. A case study is a detailed examination of one setting or one subject or one document storage location or one particular event (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The purpose of using this case study method is to understand real-life phenomena in depth, but such understanding includes important contextual conditions because they are closely

related to the study phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Research and data collection related to the strategy to strengthen the existence of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school were carried out from April 2025 to June 2024. The research period is not only a limitation, but so that data collection can be maximized and run effectively.

Participant

The informants or subjects of this study include; the Head of the Foundation, the principal, one teacher, one education staff, one community leader and one representative of the student's parents. The last is a document study, which is describing a case using documents. This study collects policy documents, school profiles, and archives related to the strategy of strengthening the existence of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers collect their own data through documentation, observation, or interviews with participants, the researcher himself is the only instrument in conducting information. (Creswell, 2014). The focus of researchers in observation is to observe the management of educational institutions in establishing relationships with strategic school partners, recruitment strategies for prospective students, promotion strategies, creating school images and matters relating to the strategies carried out by the management of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school in strengthening the existence of their educational institutions. Then in the interview technique, researchers seek information or data through questions and answers aimed at several research subjects.

Data Analysis

Data analysis begins with the data collection process, which involves various methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. The data collected is carried out in depth and in detail, allowing for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. After that, data condensation is carried out, which is the stage where researchers select, focus, simplify, abstract, and transform data contained in field

notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other empirical materials. In this stage, researchers try to condense the data to make it more meaningful, by setting aside information that is not relevant or does not support the focus of the research. Furthermore, the data will be presented in the form of a display; researchers organize the information obtained into tables that are easily accessible and more concise, making it easier to observe and draw conclusions in the next analysis stage. The end of the study includes conclusions and verification based on data that has been processed through collection, condensation, and presentation. In this section, researchers formulate answers to research problems and questions, and verify by reviewing or correcting existing field notes (Miles et al., 2014).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are findings obtained from the analysis of qualitative data collected through observation, interviews, and document studies. This study focuses on the challenges in maintaining the existence of Buddhist religious education institutions at the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna School in Jepara Regency. Based on the results of the research findings, it shows that there are three factors that are challenges for the Nava Dhammasekha school management in strengthening the existence of the school, namely 1) The brand and image of the Dhammasekha school which is not yet strong in the community, 2) Limited segmentation and market, 3) Community and stakeholder support that is not yet optimal.

Dhammasekha School's Brand and Image Are Not Yet Strong

One of the most important findings in this study shows that the Brand and Image of Dhammasekha school is not yet strong in the hearts of the community. This is partly due to the lack of public understanding of the vision, mission and goals of this school compared to other schools that are already known to the community. In addition, the management of the Nava Dhammasekha school also said that it was

still not optimal in conducting socialization to the user community, especially Buddhists, regarding the big picture of the implementation of this Nava Dhammasekha school. The following is the result of an excerpt from an interview conducted with the principal of Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna;

"From our observations as school administrators, we do see that the Dhammasekha school is not yet widely known by the public, especially Buddhists. The information they get is also very limited. So it does require time and a special strategy so that the Dhammasekha school can leave an impression and be in the hearts of the public as customers of this education"(interview DMS-KS02, 14 April 2025).

This opinion is in line with the results of an interview conducted with a community figure and also a Buddhist religious figure in the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school environment who said that he was still very unfamiliar with the Dhammasekha school program. The following is an excerpt from the interview;

"Yes, to be honest, I just heard about the Dhammasekha school, and it's even a formal school, yes, as far as we know, we already know about the common ones like PAUD, TK, SD, but honestly, I just heard about the Dhammasekha school, so if you ask me about the program, curriculum, and vision and mission, we don't really know"(interview DMS-TM/TA04, 15 April 2025).

Other findings show that the lack of media exposure and less than optimal promotional strategies are factors causing the weak brand awareness. Schools have not actively utilized socialization and publication through social media or digital platforms to introduce their vision, flagship programs, and student achievements and have not used other approaches in introducing and understanding Dhammasekha schools such as through religious activity forums, discussions with user communities, and conducting dialogues with stakeholders and the wider community.

"We do admit that we have not been maximal in promoting or approaching the community, especially Buddhists. Yes, we are still just walking normatively, for

example, we have not held meetings with the community to promote this school, indeed not yet. From social media, we also feel that it has not been maximal". (interview DMS-KS02, 14 April 2025).

Based on the findings related to the weak Brand and Image of Dhammasekha school, it does show that Dhammasekha school is not fully understood by the community of education customers, especially Buddhists, because in addition to limited information and also the limited socialization and promotion strategies of Dhammasekha school, the school also indeed the process of forming the Brand and Image of the school in general requires time and consistency in implementing core values, public image, and delivering strong messages to the community.

Limited Segmentation and Market

Other research findings that are a challenge in maintaining the existence of the Dhammasekha school are the limitations in the segmentation and targets of the school. The Dhammasekha school certainly specifically targets school-age Buddhists, although the Dhammasekha school does not close to accepting students other than Buddhists. However, this is one of the obstacles and also an anxiety for the management of the Dhammasekha school education institution. The following are the results of an interview with the chairman of the Vajra Guna Muryantoro Foundation which oversees the Nava Dhammasekha Viya Guna school;

"Of course we also had concerns when we first opened this school, whether it would be able to survive in the long term or not, because we know very well that our segment is limited, yes, even though there are more than 225 Buddhists in one hamlet, but still the number is not that many." (interview DMS-KYY01, 28 April 2025).

Based on the results of the interview with the chairman of the Vajra Guna Muryantoro Foundation, it shows that limited segmentation and market are one of the major challenges in maintaining the existence of the managed educational institutions. This is also

supported by a statement from the results of an interview with one of the teachers, here is an excerpt from the interview results;

"Yes, if you say it is limited, it is indeed limited to our target students, especially since we are not a minority religion here, of course this is an obstacle and a challenge. Although Dhammasekha school is also open to adherents of other religions, but still, other religions certainly choose the education services that exist from their religion or in PAUD schools under the Education Office, adherents of other religions certainly have fanaticism for their respective religions and that is only natural." (interview DMS-GR03, 28 April 2025).

Based on the results of several interviews with the Head of the Foundation and Teachers of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna School, it shows that the problems related to the limitations of segmentation and targets are one of the problems that are quite a big obstacle in developing this educational institution. Concerns about market limitations which also mean the limited number of students' enthusiasm for admission are one of the challenges for the Buddhist-based educational institution, the Dhammasekha School, to be able to continue to innovate and organize strategies so that challenges related to limited targets and markets do not become obstacles or even become a threat in maintaining the existence of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school.

Lack of Support from the Community and Stakeholders

The findings of this study indicate that in addition to the Brand and Image that are not yet strong, and the limited segmentation of the Dhammasekha school, there is support from stakeholders from the assembly, donors, parents of students, and religious organizations that are still considered not optimal. It is known that in the Buddhist community there are many aspects that support the success of organizing religious activities including services in Education, such as the Sangha community, assembly, donors, government and also religious organizations. Based on the results of interviews with the principal, it shows that the support and participation of stakeholders in the development

of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school are still not optimal, the following is an excerpt from the interview;

"We feel that the role of our partners, such as the Assembly, religious organizations, donors, religious figures and the community have not fully provided optimal support for the implementation of the Dhammasekha school, as well as the support of parents which we feel needs to be maximized." (interview DMS-KS02, 14 April 2025).

The statement was also confirmed by a statement from a teacher who also said that there was still low support and participation from several parties related to the implementation of the Nava Dhammasekha school. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a teacher from the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna School;

"Yes, as a teacher, I do feel that especially the support from parents' involvement in school development is still not optimal. Likewise, as a teacher here, I feel that there is still minimal training and coaching carried out by the government or other institutions." (interview DMS-GR03, 28 April 2025).

Support from the community and stakeholders is an important part in the development and ensuring the sustainability of schools founded by the community, especially the Buddhist community. In addition to school management in the internal scope, external support is very vital both in terms of material and non-material support. In the midst of the challenges of the times, schools like Dhammasekha need collective support in order to innovate, compete, and expand their reach of influence. However, currently support from stakeholders is still considered sporadic.

"For our initial operational support, we have assistance from donors from Jakarta, yes for initial operations such as facilities and infrastructure and also for teacher honorariums. But that is not a permanent funder or donor. But we are still grateful that after approximately two years of operation, there has been assistance from the government for operations." (interview DMS-KYY01, 28 April 2025).

Based on the description of the research

findings, it shows that the management of the Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school in development and management still relies on internal resources and still needs to encourage external parties to be more involved in strengthening the management of the school. The school management realizes how important support is from external parties such as donors, councils, parents of students and communities also organizations that can be involved in developing the Nava Dhammasekha school. The lack of support from external parties is an important concern as well as a challenge to be able to maximize the role of external parties in participating in building and developing the Dhammasekha school, so that from there it is hoped that the sustainability and existence of the Dhammasekha School Education institution can grow and exist.

Based on the results of the research findings, it shows that the management of Dhammasekha school has various challenges, especially in how to strengthen the existence of Dhammasekha school amidst competition with similar educational institutions. The following is a synthesis of the research findings; Dhammasekha school's brand and image are not yet strong, Limited segmentation and market, and Community and stakeholder support is not yet optimal.

Challenges in Terms of Dhammasekha School Brand and Image

One of the challenges of the existence and sustainability of the implementation of the Nava Dhammasekha school is the Brand and Image of the Nava Dhammasekha school which is not yet strong in the community. The public, even the Buddhist community itself, is still not familiar enough with the superior programs, quality of service, vision-mission and policies of the implementation of the Dhammasekha school. The implementation of the Nava Dhammasekha School as a formal school based on religion at the early childhood education level, needs to show its existence amidst competition with similar education services such as PAUD under the Education Office, even with similar schools based on religion such as RA in Islam, Pasraman in Hinduism and so on. The quality of

service of an educational institution can provide an advantage in competition between educational institutions (Soko et al., 2019).

Nava Dhammasekha School, which can be said to be newly developed compared to other religious-based schools, needs a special strategy to have a positive brand and image in the community, especially the main customers of

Dhammasekha School, namely the Buddhist community. The image of the school is significantly related to student registration at the school and is able to increase student interest and community awareness (Nakalyakaani, 2020; Walid & Malik, 2024). For that reason, the Dhammasekha School service manager needs to be consistent and planned in forming a positive image of the Dhammasekha school. Industrial structure, internal resources, and branding in maintaining the performance of the institution (Huang, 2010). A consistent school image can build student and parent loyalty, even after graduation (James & James, 2022). The ability to build a school's branding image is very important so that outsiders, especially the community, know the school well. Thus, schools that have a branding image can automatically compete with other superior schools. The charismatic figure of a religious figure is also important. (Angga, 2020).

Dhammasekha School which certainly has uniqueness and different attractions from other public schools, of course this is one of the strengths that can be used in building the brand and image of Dhammasekha School in order to attract the interest and awareness of Education customers so that they can grow and exist. In order for Educational institutions to survive and survive, a strategy is needed to strengthen the image of Educational institutions, as well as highlighting the advantages and uniqueness (Munjin, 2022; Fitri, 2021). The brand and image of the Dhammasekha school will be a big challenge if the school management is unable to convey information to the community, build a positive image of the school and build public demand and awareness. This will be an obstacle and challenge for the Dhammasekha school to

grow and exist amidst competition with similar schools because various studies show that the brand image of the school has an impact on the ability of educational institutions to survive and exist in the midst of society.

Limited Segmentation and Market

The existence of the Nava Dhammasekha school educational institution is greatly influenced by the number and enthusiasm of prospective students. It should be noted that the Nava Dhammasekha School has a main target market of Buddhists. Although it is not specifically stated that the Nava Dhammasekha school is only intended for Buddhists, the label and religious beliefs still influence someone in making a decision to choose a school. Religiosity, school image, and excellent programs partially have a significant influence on the decision to choose an educational institution. (Suharsono et al., 2023). Religion and beliefs shape identities and values that influence decisions to choose a school, especially in the context of religious education and religious schools (Shaw, 2018).

Segmentation and market have a significant role in the sustainability of an educational institution. Nava Dhammasekha with the main segmentation and target being Buddhists, of course this is a challenge in itself with the number of Buddhists who are not the majority. Based on data from dataindonesia.id, the number of Buddhists in Indonesia is currently 0.73% of the total population of 277.75 million people in Indonesia, this shows that the number of Buddhists is relatively smaller when compared to other religions. Limited segmentation and targets certainly have an impact that the Nava Dhammasekha school is more difficult to develop in terms of the number of students.

Low Support from The Community and Stakeholders

Dhammasekha School in order to grow and develop certainly needs support from various levels of society and school partner institutions. The participation of the community and school partners is expected to provide support in strengthening the quality of the Nava Dhammasekha school. However, currently the

Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna school is facing a challenge in maximizing the role of the community in strengthening the services of the Nava Dhammasekha school education institution. The community, parents and several partner institutions such as assemblies, religious

organizations and the government have not been optimal in providing support both in the operational implementation of education and in the aspect of support in improving the quality of the Nava Dhammasekha school. There is a significant relationship between the level of awareness of internal and external stakeholder participation and stakeholder management plans for the sustainability of school programs and projects (Millano & Callo, 2024).

Strengthening and public participation, both parents, society and community as strategic partners of the school will be able to provide a major impact on the improvement and development of educational institutions which will ultimately be able to influence how an educational institution can continue to exist and grow. Community involvement and public participation can strengthen the existence of an educational institution (Torsdottir et al., 2024; Flowers & Chodkiewicz, 2009). Good community participation management helps in the effective development of schools, showing that good collaboration between principals, teachers and parents is very important in supporting the continuity and development of schools (Hamidun & Mahmudah, 2021). Open and transparent communication, active involvement in social activities, and a deep understanding of community needs and aspirations can significantly improve the reputation of an educational institution (Arini, 2024). This shows that an educational institution including Nava Dhammasekha School needs to collaborate and be more open in order to build public participation so that Dhammasekha School can grow and develop together with the community.

IV. CONCLUSION

The challenges in maintaining the existence of Nava Dhammasekha Virya Guna School in

Jepara Regency can be viewed from three current aspects:

1. The brand and public image of Dhammasekha schools, which remain weak within both the Buddhist community and the wider society;
2. Limited segmentation and market reach; and
3. The lack of optimal support from the community, religious organizations, and other stakeholders.

These three challenges represent fundamental issues that must be effectively managed to ensure that Dhammasekha schools continue to grow and sustain their existence amid competition with similar educational institutions. Furthermore, they must be able to gain acceptance not only within the Buddhist community but also among the general public, while providing inclusive and high-quality education that upholds and implements Buddhist religious values.

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