

TEACHERS AS NAVIGATORS OF DIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVES IN IMPLEMENTING MULTICULTURAL RELIGIOUS VALUES IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

PROFESSORES COMO NAVEGADORES DA DIVERSIDADE: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO SOBRE AS PERSPECTIVAS DOS EDUCADORES NA IMPLEMENTAÇÃO DE VALORES RELIGIOSOS MULTICULTURAIS EM ESCOLAS ISLÂMICAS DA INDONÉSIA

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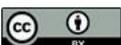
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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perspectives, pedagogical strategies, and challenges faced by teachers in integrating multicultural religious values within Indonesian Islamic schools. Recognizing the critical role of educators as primary agents in shaping young minds, the research addresses how they navigate the dual mandate of fostering strong religious identity while promoting peace and pluralism in a diverse society. Employing a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with 15 purposively selected teachers from three Islamic senior high schools (Madrasah Aliyah) in Java and Sumatra. Thematic analysis revealed three primary themes: 1) Teacher conceptualizations of multicultural religious education as a doctrinal imperative for social harmony, 2) Adaptive pedagogical strategies ranging from contextualized interpretation of texts to interfaith simulation, and 3) Significant challenges including conservative parental pressure, limited training, and the tension between national pluralistic curricula and local religious orthodoxy. The findings underscore that teachers act not merely as curriculum deliverers but as critical navigators who interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist broader discourses on diversity. The study concludes that for multicultural values to be effectively

Resumo

Este estudo qualitativo explora as perspectivas, estratégias pedagógicas e desafios enfrentados pelos professores na integração de valores religiosos multiculturais nas escolas islâmicas indonésias. Reconhecendo o papel fundamental dos educadores como principais agentes na formação das mentes jovens, a pesquisa aborda como eles lidam com a dupla missão de fomentar uma forte identidade religiosa e, ao mesmo tempo, promover a paz e o pluralismo em uma sociedade diversificada. Empregando uma abordagem fenomenológica, os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas aprofundadas e discussões em grupos focais com 15 professores selecionados propositalmente de três escolas secundárias islâmicas (Madrasah Aliyah) em Java e Sumatra. A análise temática revelou três temas principais: 1) Conceituações dos professores sobre a educação religiosa multicultural como um imperativo doutrinário para a harmonia social, 2) Estratégias pedagógicas adaptativas que vão desde a interpretação contextualizada de textos até simulações inter-religiosas, e 3) Desafios significativos, incluindo pressão conservadora dos pais, treinamento limitado e a tensão entre currículos pluralistas nacionais e ortodoxia religiosa local. Os resultados ressaltam que os professores atuam não apenas como transmissores do currículo, mas como



internalized, systemic support through targeted teacher professional development, community engagement programs, and responsive policy frameworks is essential. This research contributes to the global discourse on faith-based education in plural societies by highlighting the agency and lived experiences of Islamic educators in Indonesia.

Keywords: Multicultural Religious Education. Teacher Perspectives. Islamic Schools. Indonesia. Qualitative Study. Peace Education. Pluralism.

navegadores críticos que interpretam, adaptam e, às vezes, resistem a discursos mais amplos sobre diversidade. O estudo conclui que, para que os valores multiculturais sejam efetivamente internalizados, é essencial o apoio sistêmico por meio do desenvolvimento profissional específico dos professores, programas de envolvimento comunitário e estruturas políticas responsivas. Esta pesquisa contribui para o discurso global sobre a educação baseada na fé em sociedades plurais, destacando a agência e as experiências vividas pelos educadores islâmicos na Indonésia.

Palavras-chave: Educação Religiosa Multicultural. Perspectivas dos Professores. Escolas Islâmicas. Indonésia. Estudo Qualitativo. Educação Para a Paz. Pluralismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by global identity politics and rising socio-religious tensions, education systems worldwide are tasked with the dual challenge of cultivating cultural/religious identity and fostering civic pluralism (Banks, 2019). This tension is particularly acute in religious education, where doctrine-specific instruction must be reconciled with the principles of mutual respect in diverse societies. How educational institutions manage this balance has profound implications for social cohesion, intergroup relations, and sustainable peace. This task moves beyond curriculum design to hinge on the daily practices and interpretations of individual educators, who act as crucial mediators between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and pluralism.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, presents a critical case study in this global dynamic. Characterized by immense religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, its national stability is underpinned by *Pancasila*, a philosophical foundation that uniquely intertwines the belief in one God with principles of just and civilized humanity, national unity, democracy, and social justice. Within this framework, Islamic schools (*madrasah* and *pesantren*) occupy a pivotal position. They are not merely centers for religious literacy but are crucial discursive arenas where interpretations of Islam in relation to Indonesian pluralism are actively negotiated and transmitted to the younger generation (Hefner, 2018; Rokhmad, 2023). The success of the government's flagship

“Moderasi Beragama” (Religious Moderation) policy, aimed at countering radicalism and promoting inclusive nationalism, is heavily contingent on its implementation within these institutions. Ultimately, this policy’s translation from abstract ideal to lived classroom experience depends overwhelmingly on frontline educators—the teachers who must interpret, adapt, and enact these pluralistic mandates (Arifianto, 2022).

Recent scholarship has begun to map this complex terrain, though key gaps remain. First, studies like that of Parker and Raihani (2021) have documented the success of specific “model” *pesantren*, often attributing it to charismatic leadership and a consciously progressive curriculum. These cases, while inspiring, may represent exceptions rather than the norm. Second, content analyses, such as Zuhdi’s (2020) examination of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) textbooks, reveal an increased inclusion of pluralistic messages. However, these messages are often framed within an Islamic-centric paradigm, presenting tolerance as a *concession* or strategic Islamic virtue rather than a universal principle, a framing that recent critical discourse analyses continue to note (Fahrudin et al., 2023). Third, structural and political challenges are significant. As Afrianty (2019) highlighted, decentralization has allowed regions with stricter religious norms to exert greater influence on local school policies, potentially circumventing or diluting national pluralistic directives—a dynamic that continues to shape educational equity (Muttagin et al., 2023).

Fourth, the role of the teacher as an agent has been acknowledged. Jackson and Kleden’s (2022) comparative work rightly notes that teacher autonomy in *madrrasah* is typically high, making their personal beliefs, pedagogical content knowledge, and competencies critical variables in determining educational outcomes. Finally, quantitative surveys, such as the work of Aminullah et al. (2023), provide a broad snapshot, finding generally positive teacher dispositions towards pluralism. However, such surveys cannot capture the nuanced, context-bound, and often contradictory lived experiences of teaching pluralism in a religious classroom. They leave unanswered the essential questions of *how* teachers navigate doctrinal texts to teach respect for difference, *why* they choose certain pedagogical methods over others, and *what* personal dilemmas they confront in the process.

Thus, while existing studies have valuably addressed macro-level policy, meso-level curriculum content, and general teacher attitudes, a significant gap persists in deeply

understanding the *phenomenological reality* of the teachers themselves. There is a lack of fine-grained, qualitative inquiry that centers teacher voice and agency to explore the cognitive and emotional labor involved in reconciling religious conviction with pluralistic mandates. This study addresses this gap by positioning teachers not as passive policy implementers but as active “navigators of diversity.” It seeks to uncover the subjective meanings they construct, the tactical strategies they deploy, and the constraints they negotiate daily.

Consequently, this study is guided by the central research question: What are the perspectives, strategies, and perceived challenges of Islamic school teachers in implementing multicultural religious values in Indonesia? To answer this, the research specifically explores three interconnected dimensions. The first dimension focuses on conceptual understanding, investigating how teachers conceptually frame and legitimize the integration of multicultural and pluralistic values within an Islamic education framework. This line of inquiry seeks to uncover the theological, ethical, or civic rationales teachers employ, such as concepts like *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood), *maslahah* (public good), or *rahmatal lil-‘alamin* (mercy to all creation), to make this integration intellectually coherent and pedagogically viable. This exploration builds on recent work examining the internal Islamic discourses used to support pluralism.

The second dimension centers on pedagogical navigation, probing the specific, self-developed pedagogical strategies and classroom practices teachers employ to translate abstract concepts of peace and pluralism into concrete student learning. This moves beyond an analysis of prescribed textbooks to investigate practical methods such as the contextualization of religious texts, the facilitation of critical dilemma discussions, the use of experiential learning activities, and the reframing of national ideologies like Pancasila through an Islamic lens.

The third and final dimension examines the lived challenges, asking what personal, institutional, and societal challenges teachers perceive as most salient in this endeavor. This includes navigating the persistent tensions between national policy and local religious orthodoxy, responding to conservative parental or community pressure, managing a lack of specific training in multicultural pedagogy, and contending with their

own internal epistemological tensions between exclusive religious truth claims and the demands of pluralistic respect.

By focusing on these dimensions, this study contributes to both academic discourse and practical policy. Academically, it enriches the literature on religious education, teacher agency, and peacebuilding in plural societies by providing a thick description of the “lived curriculum” as experienced by its primary facilitators. Practically, its findings aim to inform more effective, culturally sensitive, and teacher-empowering professional development programs and policy supports, ensuring that the vision of “Moderasi Beragama” can be sustainably realized in the classrooms where Indonesia’s future is being shaped.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply understand the lived experiences and essences of the phenomenon as perceived by the teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design was chosen to uncover the subjective meanings teachers attach to their role in promoting multicultural values.

The study was conducted in three Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High Schools) across different cultural contexts: one in urban Central Java, one in rural East Java, and one in urban West Sumatra. Using purposive sampling, 15 teachers of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Islamic Character Education (Akidah Akhlak) were selected. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience and direct involvement in teaching subjects related to ethics, social studies, or religious plurality. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 55, with diverse educational backgrounds from Indonesian Islamic universities.

Primary data collection instruments were: 1) Semi-structured interview guides, designed with open-ended questions exploring teachers’ definitions, methods, and challenges. 2) Focus Group Discussion (FGD) protocols to stimulate interaction and uncover collective views among teachers in each school. 3) A researcher journal for reflexive notes on non-verbal cues and contextual observations during school visits.

Data collection occurred over four months. The steps included: 1) Gaining formal access and ethical clearance from school authorities. 2) Conducting initial individual

interviews (45-60 minutes each), recorded and transcribed verbatim. 3) Facilitating one FGD per school (90 minutes each) to discuss common scenarios and dilemmas. 4) Conducting brief follow-up interviews with select participants for clarification and member checking.

Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was employed: 1) Familiarization with transcripts and notes. 2) Generating initial codes. 3) Searching for themes by collating codes. 4) Reviewing and refining themes. 5) Defining and naming themes. 6) Producing the final report. Analysis was assisted by NVivo 12 software. To ensure rigor, triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources (interviews, FGDs), member checking of transcripts and interpretations, and peer debriefing with fellow researchers.

3 RESEARCH ETHICS

This study adhered to strict ethical protocols. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, explaining the study's purpose, confidentiality terms, and the right to withdraw. Anonymity was guaranteed by using pseudonyms for all participants and schools. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices. The researcher maintained a position of reflexivity, acknowledging her own position as an educational researcher committed to pluralism, and actively worked to minimize bias during interviews and analysis.

4 FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Analysis of the data revealed three core themes that capture the essence of teachers' experiences as navigators of diversity.

4.1 Conceptualizing multicultural religious education: between *Ukhuwah Islamiyah* and *Ukhuwah Wathaniyah*

Teachers framed the purpose of multicultural education primarily through Islamic theological and social concepts. They consistently referenced *ukhuwah*

islamiyah (brotherhood among Muslims) and, more significantly for pluralism, *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (brotherhood among fellow citizens). Teaching pluralism was seen not as a secular political mandate but as a religious duty to maintain social harmony (*masalahah*). As Mr. Arif (West Sumatra) stated, “*Respecting followers of other religions is part of adab (ethics) and a fulfillment of the Qur’anic command to ‘compete in good deeds.’ The goal is not to dilute our faith, but to strengthen the nation as a common home.*” However, interpretations varied, with some teachers emphasizing coexistence without theological relativism, strictly maintaining the finality of Islam while advocating civic respect.

4.2 Pedagogical navigation: adaptive strategies in the classroom

Teachers described employing a range of adaptive, often self-developed, pedagogical strategies. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Teacher-Reported Pedagogical Strategies for Multicultural Values

Strategy Category	Specific Techniques	Illustrative Quote
Textual Contextualization	Linking Qur’anic verses (e.g., Al-Hujurat: 13) and Hadith to contemporary Indonesian diversity; Discussing historical examples of the Prophet’s interactions with non-Muslims.	“ <i>I show them Surah Al-Kafirun—it’s about theological disagreement, but it ends with ‘for you your religion, for me mine.’ This is the basis for agreeing to disagree peacefully.</i> ” (Ibu Fatimah, Central Java)
Value Reframing	Framing national values like <i>Pancasila</i> and <i>Bhinneka Tunggal Ika</i> as Islamic imperatives for social order.	“ <i>Unity in diversity is not a government slogan; it is a manifestation of ta’awun (cooperation) in goodness that Allah commands.</i> ” (Mr. Dani, East Java)
Active & Experiential Learning	Role-playing, simulations of interfaith dialogue, group projects on local cultures, inviting guest speakers from other faiths.	“ <i>I divided the class into groups to research different places of worship in our city. They presented on the history and rituals. The curiosity was genuine.</i> ” (Ibu Siti, West Sumatra)
Dilemma Discussion	Presenting ethical case studies from news media involving inter-religious conflict and guiding <i>halaqah</i> (discussion circles) to find Islamic ethical solutions.	“ <i>We discuss: if your Christian neighbor is having a celebration during your fasting month, what is the akhlak (morality) of a Muslim? It creates deep reflection.</i> ” (Mr. Bayu, Central Java)

4.3 Navigating challenges: the rocky terrain

Teachers navigating the implementation of multicultural values encounter a complex and rocky terrain defined by multi-layered challenges. The most prominent obstacle is external pressure from conservative parents and community leaders, who often perceive lessons on pluralism as a dilution of doctrinal purity. One teacher from East Java explained, “The hardest feedback comes from home. A parent once asked me directly, ‘Are you teaching our children to equate all religions?’ We must constantly justify that respect is not the same as theological agreement.” Compounding this is a critical lack of targeted professional training, leaving educators feeling institutionally unsupported. As voiced in a Focus Group Discussion, “We are told to teach moderation, but we never get concrete training on how to handle a student who says his parents call other religions *kafir*.” This sentiment underscores a gap between policy mandates and practical pedagogical preparedness.

Furthermore, teachers operate within a palpable tension between national directives and localized religious orthodoxy. A participant from West Sumatra noted, “Here, the local *syariah* norms are very strong. Sometimes the ministry’s module feels like a distant theory, while the community’s expectations are our daily reality.” This socio-institutional friction forces educators into a delicate balancing act. Finally, they grapple with a profound internal epistemological tension, striving to reconcile absolute religious truth claims with the relativistic ethos of multicultural respect. A senior teacher reflected, “My heart is divided. I believe in the finality of my faith, yet I must teach that other paths deserve dignity. It is not a contradiction I can easily resolve, but one I must manage every day.” These interconnected challenges—external pressure, inadequate training, policy-community dissonance, and personal cognitive dissonance—collectively shape the difficult reality of fostering pluralism in Islamic school classrooms.

5 DISCUSSION

This study reveals that Islamic school teachers in Indonesia are not passive implementers of policy but active navigators who mediate between multiple, sometimes competing, discourses. Their role is fundamentally agentic, creative, and fraught with

complexity, positioning them as crucial, yet under-supported, linchpins in the national project of fostering religious moderation and pluralism. This finding challenges deficit models that view teachers in religious schools primarily as doctrinal enforcers or resisters to modern, pluralist values (Parker & Revell, 2018). Instead, it aligns with sociological literature on “teacher agency” (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), demonstrating that such agency is exercised within a dense web of constraints and opportunities specific to religiously-charged environments. Their navigation involves a constant process of translation, finding Islamic equivalents for state-mandated pluralist concepts, thereby “domesticating” them within a normative Islamic framework. This process of internal legitimization is a critical form of cultural brokerage that deserves greater scholarly attention (Rissanen, Kuusisto, & Kuusisto, 2016).

The teachers’ grounding of pluralism within Islamic theology powerfully reflects what Hefner (2021) has termed “civil Islam” in Indonesia—a tradition that mobilizes religious discourse for civic virtue and nation-building. This provides a potent source of internal legitimacy that externally imposed secular or liberal-humanist frameworks would lack and likely reject. However, this study also confirms the limits of this framework. The observed avoidance of deep theological relativism—the insistence on Islamic truth while advocating civic respect for others—echoes what Zuhdi (2020) identifies as a “bounded pluralism” in Indonesian Islamic education. This construct prioritizes social harmony (*ukhuwah*) and pragmatic benefit (*masalah*) over deep epistemic engagement with the theological foundations of other faiths. It creates a “civic pluralism” robust for maintaining peace but may stop short of fostering inter-religious dialogue that challenges one’s own theological assumptions (Kalmanson & Green, 2022). This boundedness is a strategic, realist adaptation that makes pluralistic education palatable within orthodox communities, suggesting the most sustainable form of pluralism in deeply religious societies may be one that is theologically “gated” but civically “open.”

The documented pedagogical strategies—contextualizing texts, reframing universal values, and facilitating dilemma discussions—are testaments to significant teacher creativity and commitment. They move beyond rote learning towards the kind of critical and affective pedagogy championed by global peace and human rights education scholars (Bajaj, 2019). The use of active learning to foster empathy aligns with research underscoring the role of perspective-taking in reducing prejudice (Kidd & Castano,

2013). However, the ad-hoc and uneven nature of these innovations exposes a critical systemic failure. As Jackson and Kleden (2022) note, teacher autonomy is necessary but insufficient. What is missing is structured support for developing *Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)* specific to multicultural religious education (Shulman, 1987). The absence of such specialized training places an unfair burden on individual teachers, leading to variable implementation and professional burnout, reflecting a policy gap where mandates are issued without investing in the required professional development (Leirvik, 2021).

The challenges teachers face—particularly parental resistance—highlight that classrooms are microcosms of larger socio-political battles over religious authority and identity (Afrianty, 2019). Consequently, the teacher becomes a frontline actor in mediating between the centripetal force of the unitary state and the centrifugal forces of local communal orthodoxy. This role is inherently political. Teachers who actively promote pluralism may be seen as agents of the state by their communities, while those who resist may be flagged by authorities as obstacles to national harmony. This positioning requires not just pedagogical skill but also diplomatic acumen and immense social courage. Recent studies on education in conflict-affected areas emphasize the “everyday peacebuilding” role of teachers (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, & Smith, 2017); this research shows that Islamic school teachers in Indonesia are engaged in a form of “everyday peacebuilding” within a contested, yet non-violent, socio-religious landscape.

Perhaps the most profound finding is the internal epistemological tension reported by teachers: how to nurture firm religious conviction while fostering unconditional respect for contradictory beliefs. This is the core dilemma of any faith-based education committed to pluralism (Moulin, 2022). The teachers’ navigational strategy—compartmentalizing civic respect (*muamalah*) from theological truth (*aqidah*)—is a pragmatic solution. However, scholars caution that this approach can lead to a “tolerant segregation” where difference is respected at a distance but not deeply engaged (Wegerif, 2019). It may reinforce boundaries rather than foster the “epistemic humility” necessary for deeper coexistence in plural societies (Kunzman, 2020). Whether this bounded approach is a necessary stepping stone or a limiting ceiling for inter-religious understanding in Indonesia remains an open and critical question.

These Indonesian findings offer valuable insights for other Muslim-majority and religiously diverse societies. The success of “bounded pluralism” in Indonesia contrasts with more top-down, securitized approaches to countering extremism seen elsewhere (Petersen, 2022). It suggests that policies which work *through* religious discourse and empower local religious actors may be more sustainable than those perceived as alien or imposed. Furthermore, this study contributes to theoretical debates beyond education, illustrating the dynamic process of “everyday lived theology,” where religious principles are constantly interpreted and applied in response to contemporary social challenges (Ammerman, 2021). The teachers are, in effect, practical theologians, negotiating the meaning of Islamic tradition in a modern, plural nation-state.

In conclusion, this study fundamentally challenges top-down, document-centric analyses of educational policy implementation. It argues that the fate of Indonesia’s Religious Moderation policy depends less on the wording of curriculum guides and more on recognizing, empowering, and equipping the teacher-navigators. Therefore, effective support must move beyond general awareness training. We propose a multi-level support framework: 1) Developing specialized PCK through co-designed training modules that provide theological grounding and practical tools for sensitive discussions; 2) Creating protected Communities of Practice for teachers to collaborate and share best practices across schools, reducing isolation (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015); 3) Implementing structured family and community engagement programs to build parental understanding and support (Epstein, 2018); and 4) Formally recognizing and incentivizing this navigational work in career pathways and appraisal standards. By investing in their agency, policymakers can transform these teachers from isolated brokers into an empowered professional community, thereby strengthening the very foundations of Indonesia’s diverse democracy.

6 CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has illuminated the critical, complex, and agentic role of teachers as navigators of diversity within Indonesian Islamic schools. Their task transcends simple curriculum delivery, involving deep interpretive work to align religious doctrine with pluralistic citizenship. Teachers conceptualize this duty through an Islamic

ethical framework, employ creative and adaptive pedagogical strategies to make pluralism tangible for students, and persistently navigate a terrain marked by external pressure, limited training, and fundamental epistemological tensions.

The research concludes that the effective implementation of multicultural religious values is fundamentally dependent on the capacity and agency of individual teachers. While they demonstrate remarkable resilience and creativity, systemic support structures are currently inadequate. Therefore, recommendations are twofold: First, at the institutional and governmental level, there must be a committed investment in continuous professional development that addresses not only the ‘why’ but, more crucially, the ‘how’ of multicultural pedagogy in a religious context. Second, future research should adopt participatory action research models, collaborating with teachers to co-develop and test contextually relevant teaching resources and strategies.

Ultimately, fostering a peaceful, pluralistic society through education requires honoring and strengthening the navigational skills of these frontline educators. By providing them with better maps (curriculum), more robust instruments (training), and a supportive crew (school leadership and community), their journey toward educating for peace and pluralism can become more effective and less burdensome, ensuring that Indonesian Islamic schools continue to be pillars of both faith and national harmony.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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