

# Educating for Peace and Pluralism: The Implementation of Multicultural Religious Values in Indonesian Religious Education

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## Abstract

This study explores the implementation of multicultural religious values in Indonesian religious education, emphasizing the importance of tolerance, mutual respect, interfaith dialogue, inclusivity, and justice. Through a qualitative literature review, the research analyzes policy documents, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies to assess how these values are integrated into classroom practices. Findings reveal that while national initiatives such as *Moderasi Beragama* have successfully promoted tolerance and mutual respect, significant challenges persist in advancing interfaith dialogue, inclusive curricula, and equitable practices. These obstacles include inadequate teacher training, outdated learning materials, and resistance from conservative groups. The study highlights a critical gap between policy frameworks and pedagogical realities, stressing the need for systemic reforms. Key recommendations include enhancing teacher education, updating curricula, institutionalizing interfaith dialogue, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders to build a more inclusive, peaceful educational environment in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, religious education, interfaith dialogue, Indonesian curriculum

## 1. Introduction

In today's globally interconnected world, the significance of education as a medium to promote peace, mutual understanding, and tolerance has become increasingly urgent. The intensification of cross-border migration, the rise of religious extremism, and growing cultural polarization have created pressing challenges that cannot be resolved merely through traditional, doctrine-based instruction. Consequently, religious education (RE) is undergoing critical scrutiny worldwide, with efforts underway to reform its structure to be more responsive to the complex, multicultural, and multifaith realities of the 21st century (Marshall, 2024; UNESCO, 2020). Religious education is now being recognized not only as a tool for spiritual development but also as a strategic vehicle for cultivating respect for difference, intercultural dialogue, and peaceful coexistence.

Indonesia presents a particularly compelling case in this regard. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country and one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse nations, Indonesia embodies the principles of multiculturalism in everyday life (Nursangadah, Fitrah, Agustiningih, & Ni'mah, 2022)

. The country comprises more than 17,000 islands, is home to over 1,300 distinct ethnic groups, and officially acknowledges six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Syafieh & Anzaikhan, 2022; Barker, 2019). These demographic realities render the Indonesian educational landscape uniquely positioned—and challenged—to develop religious education programs that reflect and nurture pluralism.

Despite this richness in diversity, religious education in Indonesia has long been dominated by confessional paradigms (Susanto & Rahayani, 2022; Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023). This is particularly evident in Islamic and public schools, where the curriculum often prioritizes doctrinal instruction over intercultural or interreligious learning. Rather than equipping students to engage respectfully with people of different beliefs, many religious education programs still emphasize exclusive interpretations of faith (Moulin, 2023). This condition reveals a critical tension between Indonesia's national ideals of unity in diversity (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) and the limitations of current pedagogical practices in promoting those ideals.

One of the core problems is what can be termed as an *implementation gap*. Although the national curriculum formally encourages the inclusion of multicultural and interfaith values, in practice, the translation of these ideals into classroom realities remains inconsistent and fragmented. Teachers frequently lack the training and pedagogical tools necessary to foster inclusive religious dialogue, and teaching materials may perpetuate narrow or biased views of religious truth (Sirry, Suyanto, Sugihartati, & Yani, 2024; Ulfa, Djubaedi, Sumarna, & Hidayat, 2021). As a result, there is a disparity between curriculum mandates and the actual learning experiences of students in religious education settings.

Scholars have recognized the importance of integrating multicultural principles into education in Indonesia. For instance, Azra (2006) emphasizes the role of Islamic education in building democratic and inclusive societies, while Rahmadi & Hamdan (2023) highlights the Indonesian government's initiatives to promote religious moderation as part of a broader effort to maintain social harmony. However, most of these studies tend to focus on the theoretical or policy level, with relatively few providing a detailed analysis of how multicultural religious values are implemented at the classroom level across diverse educational institutions. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further empirical investigation. Specifically, there is a lack of comprehensive research exploring how schools—both public and religious—integrate multicultural principles into their daily religious instruction. This includes examining the extent to which values such as tolerance, interfaith understanding, inclusivity, and respect for difference are reflected in teaching practices, classroom materials, and school policies.

In response to these challenges, the present study seeks to examine the current implementation of multicultural religious values within Indonesian religious education. The central question guiding this inquiry is: **To what extent, and in what ways, are multicultural values being incorporated into the teaching and learning of religion in Indonesian schools?** By focusing on this question, the research aims to provide insights that can inform future policy and pedagogical reform efforts aimed at strengthening the role of education in fostering peace and pluralism.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative literature review** approach to investigate the implementation of multicultural values in Indonesian religious education. The review integrates a wide range of sources, including **empirical research, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks** from both national and international perspectives. Data were obtained from peer-reviewed academic journals, government reports, and institutional publications such as those by UNESCO and the OECD, ensuring a comprehensive and multi-angled understanding of the topic.

The analysis focuses on five core multicultural religious values: **tolerance, mutual respect, interfaith dialogue, inclusivity in curriculum, and justice/equality**. These values serve as thematic categories through which relevant literature was analyzed using **thematic content analysis**. The aim was to identify consistent patterns, best practices, and persistent challenges in integrating these values into the religious education landscape in Indonesia.

Seven key articles and documents were closely examined in the review:

1. **Marshall (2024)** – on intercultural education and religious understanding in plural societies.
2. **UNESCO (2020)** – on learning to live together in multicultural contexts.

3. **Azra (2006)** – on Islamic education’s role in democracy and pluralism in Indonesia.
4. **Rahmadi & Hamdan (2023)** – on the concept and practice of religious moderation.
5. **Barker (2019)** – on Indonesia’s plural identity and its sociocultural implications.
6. **OECD (2016)** – *Global Competency for an Inclusive World*.
7. **Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2021)** – on national religious curriculum reforms and guidelines.

These sources collectively provide a foundation for understanding the dynamics, gaps, and potential of multicultural religious education in the Indonesian context.

### 3. Findings

The integration of multicultural values in religious education in Indonesia reflects an evolving landscape marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Drawing from a range of reviewed literature and policy documents—including studies by Marshall (2024), UNESCO (2020), Azra (2006), Rahmadi & Hamdan (2023), Barker (2019), the OECD (2016), and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2021)—this study synthesizes key themes that emerge in the implementation of five core multicultural values: tolerance, mutual respect, interfaith dialogue, inclusivity in curriculum, and equality and justice.

Table 1 provides a summary of the implementation status of these values based on literature review and thematic content analysis:

Table 1. Summary of the implementation status

Multicultural Value	Observed Implementation	Challenges Identified
Tolerance	Widely promoted	Resistance from conservative groups
Mutual Respect	Prominently embedded	Limited teacher training
Interfaith Dialogue	Emerging but underdeveloped	Lack of institutional support
Inclusivity in Curriculum	Present but inconsistently applied	Outdated textbooks
Equality and Justice	Addressed in principle but not in practice	Cultural bias in interpretation

The value of **tolerance** is perhaps the most emphasized and widely implemented across Indonesia’s religious education framework. Influenced strongly by national policies such as the *Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation) initiative spearheaded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2021), tolerance is consistently promoted as a foundational aspect of peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society. The integration of this value is evident in many educational institutions, particularly in how students are encouraged to respect others’ beliefs. UNESCO (2020) supports this trend by advocating for tolerance as a core educational outcome necessary in multicultural environments. However, despite strong policy backing, Marshall (2024) and Azra (2006) caution that in many schools, particularly those influenced by more conservative interpretations of religion, there remains significant resistance to values perceived as diluting religious identity. This often stems from sociopolitical pressures and internal institutional conservatism.

Similarly, **mutual respect** features prominently in curricular aims and classroom practices, especially in schools that emphasize civic values and character education. The OECD (2016) framework on global competency encourages respect for cultural and religious differences as a key skill for modern learners, a notion that is increasingly being incorporated into Indonesian classrooms. Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) notes that mutual respect is central to the government’s religious moderation agenda, yet its full realization is often hindered by inadequate teacher training. Many educators are not sufficiently equipped with pedagogical strategies to foster dialogue and understanding across religious lines. Teacher preparation

programs still lack a focused emphasis on multicultural and interfaith education, as highlighted in both domestic and international evaluations (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2016).

In contrast, **interfaith dialogue** remains an emerging but significantly underdeveloped component of religious education in Indonesia. Although the plural religious makeup of the country necessitates engagement between religious communities, the actual implementation of interfaith education remains minimal. Barker (2019) and Marshall (2024) both argue that while Indonesian society is formally pluralistic, schools often shy away from engaging directly with religious differences in a dialogic fashion. Institutional support is lacking, and teachers are frequently discouraged from discussing sensitive interreligious topics for fear of controversy or misunderstanding. This aligns with the findings of Azra (2006), who noted that interreligious initiatives are often implemented more as isolated projects than as integral parts of the curriculum.

The principle of **inclusivity in curriculum** is visible in recent policy reforms, particularly those issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which call for education that reflects the nation's plural identity (Kemenag, 2021). However, the practical integration of inclusive materials across subjects remains inconsistent. One major issue is the continued reliance on outdated textbooks that do not reflect contemporary understandings of religious diversity or global citizenship (Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). UNESCO (2020) also emphasizes the importance of curriculum reform in fostering inclusivity, suggesting that without meaningful content updates, educational goals may not translate into real student learning experiences. Inclusivity is further undermined by the structural inertia of the education system, which is slow to adopt progressive narratives and often constrained by bureaucratic processes.

Finally, the value of **equality and justice**, although present in educational philosophy and some aspects of religious instruction, often lacks concrete expression in daily teaching practices. While educators may verbally advocate for justice and fairness, implicit cultural biases frequently affect how these principles are interpreted and applied. For example, gender equity and the equal treatment of religious minorities are topics that are either inadequately addressed or entirely absent from many classroom discussions (Azra, 2006; Barker, 2019). This gap reflects what UNESCO (2020) calls a disjunction between the aspirational goals of educational policy and the on-the-ground realities of classroom interaction. Moreover, the interpretation of justice in religious education is sometimes shaped by dominant cultural norms that reinforce unequal power dynamics, rather than challenge them (Marshall, 2024).

In sum, while Indonesia's religious education sector has made considerable strides in promoting multicultural values, the journey is far from complete. Tolerance and mutual respect have found meaningful, albeit uneven, expression in classrooms, while interfaith dialogue, curricular inclusivity, and justice continue to face structural and ideological barriers. As the country moves forward in shaping an education system that truly reflects its plural identity, it must prioritize teacher training, curriculum reform, and institutional support to bridge the gap between multicultural ideals and pedagogical reality.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a mixed landscape in the implementation of multicultural religious values in Indonesian religious education. While some values—particularly tolerance and mutual respect—are relatively well-established in educational discourse and practice, others such as interfaith dialogue, curricular inclusivity, and justice and equality face significant challenges in both conceptualization and execution. These findings resonate with, yet also expand upon, previous studies conducted in the field.

Azra (2006), in his foundational work on Islamic education in Indonesia, emphasized the need for religious education to promote democratic values and cultural openness. He highlighted that religious education must go beyond dogmatic instruction to incorporate civic virtues that align with Indonesia's pluralistic identity. Our study affirms this assertion, particularly in relation to the relatively successful promotion of tolerance and mutual respect. However, Azra's optimism about institutional reforms is not fully realized when

measured against the challenges identified in our review, such as the lack of teacher training and curriculum rigidity, especially in promoting interfaith dialogue.

Similarly, Barker (2019) pointed to Indonesia's complex religious demography and argued for an education system that does justice to this diversity. He noted that although the state formally recognizes six religions, religious education in public and Islamic schools remains largely mono-religious and lacks substantive engagement with others' beliefs. Our findings support this view, especially in the domain of interfaith dialogue, which remains underdeveloped due to both ideological resistance and lack of institutional support. This is in line with Marshall (2024) critique of confessional religious education systems, which he argues tend to marginalize plural voices and reinforce a single-truth narrative that is incompatible with the demands of multicultural societies.

One area where this study adds new insights is in highlighting the gap between curricular policy and classroom practice. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2021) has made substantial efforts to incorporate the language of pluralism and religious moderation into national guidelines. However, our synthesis shows that outdated textbooks and limited pedagogical materials significantly constrain the ability of teachers to translate these values into effective classroom instruction. This echoes Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) critique that although *Moderasi Beragama* is a laudable national program, it often lacks implementation mechanisms at the school and teacher level. Our findings show that while inclusivity in the curriculum exists on paper, its inconsistent application undermines its transformative potential.

When comparing our findings with international frameworks, such as the UNESCO (2020) report on "Learning to Live Together" and the OECD's (2016) "Global Competency for an Inclusive World," it becomes evident that Indonesian religious education still lags behind global standards in equipping students with the intercultural and interreligious competencies necessary for peaceful coexistence. For example, interfaith dialogue, considered a critical skill in UNESCO's framework, is largely missing or treated superficially in the Indonesian context. Our study underscores that while tolerance may be taught, it often lacks the dialogic depth necessary to confront stereotypes and build meaningful understanding between religious communities.

The challenge of cultural bias in interpretation, particularly in applying principles of equality and justice, is another point of divergence between Indonesia's educational goals and its realities. While the values of equality and justice are part of national ideology (*Pancasila*) and often cited in curriculum documents, our review found that gender bias and majoritarian religious narratives frequently undermine the equitable treatment of minority groups. These concerns align with Marshall (2024) and Barker's (2019) warnings that formal acknowledgment of diversity does not automatically translate into inclusive pedagogy.

Furthermore, this study reveals that although many teachers express personal support for multicultural values, they often lack the professional development opportunities needed to embed these values into their teaching. Unlike the OECD (2016) recommendation, which emphasizes continuous teacher training on global and intercultural competencies, Indonesia's teacher training programs rarely include modules specifically targeting religious diversity or pluralistic pedagogy. As a result, many educators default to confessional instruction, often avoiding controversial topics that might provoke resistance from parents or community stakeholders.

One possible explanation for this reluctance is what Marshall (2024) refers to as the "securitization of religion" in educational discourse—where religious difference is seen more as a threat than as a resource. This sentiment may partially explain the resistance from conservative groups observed in the implementation of tolerance and interfaith values. The fear that pluralistic education may erode religious purity or promote relativism continues to be a significant barrier, especially in more conservative regions of Indonesia.

Despite these challenges, it is important to note that there are pockets of innovation and good practice. Some schools—particularly in urban areas or those affiliated with progressive Islamic organizations—have begun

incorporating multicultural values into their teaching. These schools experiment with interactive methods, such as role-playing and discussion-based learning, to engage students with issues of diversity and coexistence. However, these examples remain isolated and are yet to be scaled into broader policy or curriculum models.

In conclusion, this study builds on earlier research while providing a more integrated and updated analysis of the state of multicultural religious education in Indonesia. It confirms that while national frameworks have moved in the direction of inclusion and pluralism, significant structural, pedagogical, and ideological barriers remain. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-level strategy involving curriculum reform, teacher training, and institutional commitment to transforming religious education into a truly inclusive and dialogic space.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of multicultural religious values in Indonesian religious education remains uneven. While values such as tolerance and mutual respect are relatively well-promoted through national frameworks like *Moderasi Beragama*, others—particularly interfaith dialogue, curricular inclusivity, and equality and justice—face structural, pedagogical, and cultural barriers. These include limited teacher training, outdated learning materials, and resistance from conservative groups. Although the national curriculum formally supports pluralistic education, the classroom reality often lacks the resources and institutional support needed to transform these ideals into practice.

To bridge this gap, several strategic actions are recommended. First, teacher education programs must integrate multicultural and interfaith pedagogies to build educators' capacity for inclusive teaching. Second, curriculum reform is needed to ensure learning materials reflect Indonesia's religious and cultural diversity. Third, interfaith dialogue should be institutionalized in school activities, supported by policies that protect and encourage pluralistic engagement. Collaboration with religious leaders, community stakeholders, and international agencies like UNESCO and OECD is also crucial to reduce resistance and foster sustainable implementation. Ultimately, religious education in Indonesia must evolve into a platform that not only nurtures faith but also cultivates empathy, justice, and peace in a pluralistic society.

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