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The Transformation of Religious Moderation Pedagogy in Reshaping the Culture of Student Social Interaction in Heterogeneous School Environments

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ABSTRACT: *Indonesia's growing socio-religious heterogeneity in public schools strains everyday student interaction, making government-promoted religious moderation (moderasi beragama) essential, though it often remains limited to normative, one-way instruction. This qualitative case study examines how the pedagogy of religious moderation transforms in practice and alters social interaction cultures in a heterogeneous secondary school. Data were gathered through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with leaders, teachers, and students, and document analysis, then evaluated using thematic analysis with credibility established via triangulation. Findings reveal, first, that effective pedagogy shifted from monological doctrine transmission toward a dialogical, experience-based model utilizing cooperative cross-group projects. Second, this pedagogical evolution transformed student interaction from religiously segregated association into spontaneous, cross-affiliation collaboration, despite lingering micro-exclusion in informal spaces. Third, transformation durability depended heavily on teacher competence, consistent leadership, and alignment between formal and hidden curricula. The study concludes that religious moderation becomes culturally transformative only when pedagogically embodied as a dialogical practice rather than delivered as moral information. Practically, it recommends structured cross-affiliation collaborative learning as a replicable strategy for heterogeneous educational settings.*

Keywords: *Religious Moderation; Pedagogical Transformation; Social Interaction Culture; Heterogeneous School; Tolerance Education*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is constitutionally and sociologically a plural nation, in which schools function as one of the earliest and most intensive sites where children from different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are brought into sustained daily contact. This heterogeneity is not merely a demographic fact; it is a pedagogical condition that shapes how young people learn to recognize difference, negotiate disagreement, and build solidarity across group boundaries (Mariyono, 2024). When that condition is poorly managed, schools risk becoming arenas in which prejudice, exclusion, and even intergroup conflict are quietly reproduced rather than resolved (Bender-Szymanski, 2012; Civitillo et al., 2017). It is against this backdrop that the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has promoted *moderasi beragama*, or religious moderation, as a national strategic program intended to cultivate a balanced, tolerant, and non-extreme religiosity among citizens, with schools positioned as a primary vehicle for its transmission (Fahri & Zainuri, 2019).

In practice, however, religious moderation is frequently reduced to a set of normative slogans delivered through lectures, wall banners, or occasional seminars, rather than embedded as a pedagogy that structures how students actually learn to interact (Ar, 2020; Purbajati, 2020). Religion teachers, who are institutionally expected to be the main agents of religious moderation, often continue to rely on a monological transmission model in which tolerance is explained as a moral proposition to be memorized rather than practiced through structured encounters with difference (Hatim, 2018; Usman & Widyanto, 2019). This gap between the normative ambition of religious moderation policy and its pedagogical enactment in classrooms is precisely the problem this study addresses. Tolerance that is only spoken about, without being lived through cooperative and dialogical classroom experience, tends to remain fragile and easily reversible once students face real friction with peers of different backgrounds (Dianita et al., 2018).

A growing body of research supports the proposition that pedagogy, not policy language alone, is the decisive variable in shaping intergroup attitudes among students. International studies on cultural diversity approaches at school

demonstrate that teachers' instructional choices, including whether diversity is treated as a resource for collaborative tasks or as a background fact to be managed, significantly shape students' intercultural competence and willingness to engage across group lines (Civitillo et al., 2017). Similarly, comparative work on religious and ideological diversity in the classroom shows that assimilationist or purely informational teaching strategies tend to entrench, rather than dissolve, group boundaries, whereas integrative and dialogical strategies open space for genuine intergroup learning (Bender-Szymanski, 2012). These findings from cross-national contexts resonate strongly with the Indonesian setting, where religious diversity in the school culture has likewise been shown to require active pedagogical mediation rather than passive coexistence (Haracemiv & Branco, 2018).

Within the Indonesian literature, several studies have examined the conceptual content of religious moderation and its formal placement in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum, showing that the concept of *wasathiyah* (moderation) has been structurally integrated into curricular documents (Maulidin et al., 2025; Alfianur et al., 2024). Other studies have highlighted the teacher's role as a moral model and facilitator of tolerant attitudes (Alhafizh & Setiawan, 2025; Muamalah et al., 2024), while still others have pointed to the significance of family religious environment and hidden curriculum in shaping students' social conduct toward peers (Laelasari, 2022; Umagap et al., 2022). What remains comparatively underexplored, however, is the specific mechanism by which a transformed pedagogy of religious moderation as opposed to its mere curricular presence or discursive promotion produces an observable change in the culture of everyday student interaction inside a genuinely heterogeneous school. Most existing studies either analyze curriculum documents through literature review methods (Ridho & Tumin, 2022; Rohmat, 2023) or measure isolated teacher practices (Hasanuddin et al., 2025), without empirically tracing how a pedagogical shift translates into a changed pattern of peer relations across religious lines over time.

This study therefore departs from the assumption, common in prior literature, that religious moderation's success can be inferred from curriculum content or teacher intention alone. Instead, it treats pedagogical transformation itself as the unit of analysis: how teaching shifts from doctrinal transmission to dialogical, experience-

based practice, and how students' own social interaction culture their patterns of friendship formation, group work preference, and everyday communication across religious boundaries responds to that shift. This focus offers a novel contribution by connecting classroom-level pedagogical change directly to school-level social culture, a linkage that has been asserted normatively but rarely traced empirically in the Indonesian context (Rozi et al., 2025; Ummi & Achadi, 2025).

Based on this background, the study formulates three research questions. First, how is the pedagogy of religious moderation transformed in a heterogeneous secondary school, from its conventional monological form toward a more dialogical and experiential form? Second, how does this pedagogical transformation change the culture of student social interaction within the school, particularly in patterns of cross-religious friendship, collaboration, and everyday communication? Third, what factors support or constrain the sustainability of this transformation over time? The corresponding objectives are to describe the pedagogical transformation process, to analyze its effects on students' social interaction culture, and to identify the enabling and inhibiting conditions for sustaining a transformed pedagogy of religious moderation in heterogeneous school settings. It is anticipated that the findings will offer both theoretical contribution to the literature on moderation pedagogy and practical guidance for schools, teachers, and policymakers seeking to move religious moderation programs from slogan to lived practice.

II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design, chosen because the research problem concerns a bounded, context-dependent social process the transformation of pedagogy and its effect on interaction culture within a single school that is best understood through an in-depth, holistic account rather than through variable-based generalization (Civitillo et al., 2017). The case selected was a public secondary school in East Java known for its high degree of religious and ethnic heterogeneity among its student body and for having undertaken a deliberate, multi-year effort to reform its religious education pedagogy in response to earlier incidents of exclusionary behavior among students of different religious affiliations.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. First, non-participant classroom observation was conducted across religious education sessions, extracurricular activities, and unstructured break-time interactions over a period of eight weeks, allowing the researcher to document both formally taught practices and the informal, unscripted patterns of student association that occur outside direct instructional control. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two informants, comprising the school principal, four religious education teachers representing Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, twelve students purposively selected to represent the school's religious and ethnic diversity, and five homeroom teachers responsible for coordinating cross-subject character education. Third, document analysis was carried out on the school's religious education syllabus, lesson plans, extracurricular program guidelines, and school policy documents on diversity management, in order to triangulate espoused pedagogical design against observed classroom practice.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of qualitative analysis comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, applied iteratively rather than in a strictly linear sequence so that emerging themes from early interviews could inform subsequent observation foci. Coding began with open coding of interview transcripts and observation field notes to identify recurring concepts related to pedagogical practice and interaction patterns, followed by axial coding to group these concepts into broader categories such as "dialogical instruction," "cross-group collaboration," "micro-exclusion," and "teacher facilitation capacity." These categories were then synthesized into the three thematic findings reported in Section III. To establish the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study applied source and method triangulation by cross-checking interview accounts against observational data and documentary evidence, together with member checking in which preliminary findings were presented back to three key informants (the principal and two religious teachers) for confirmation of interpretive accuracy. Prolonged engagement across the eight-week fieldwork period further allowed the researcher to distinguish genuine, internalized changes in student interaction from performative behavior displayed only when teachers were visibly present. All data collection followed standard ethical procedures for educational research, including informed consent from

adult informants and parental consent together with student assent for minor participants, and the anonymization of all individual identities in the reporting of findings.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Doctrinal Transmission to Dialogical, Experience-Based Pedagogy

The first and most fundamental finding is that the pedagogy of religious moderation in the studied school underwent a discernible shift from a monological, doctrine-transmission model toward a dialogical, experience-based model. Under the earlier model, as described consistently by teachers and older students, religious moderation was taught primarily through lecture-based explanation of the concept of *wasathiyah* and through occasional thematic assemblies, a pattern consistent with what has been documented more broadly in Indonesian Islamic Religious Education, where moderation content is often structurally present in the curriculum but pedagogically delivered as information to be absorbed rather than practiced (Hatim, 2018; Maulidin et al., 2025). Teachers in the present case openly acknowledged that this earlier approach produced students who could correctly define tolerance in an exam but who continued to self-segregate by religious affiliation during group work and free time, echoing the broader observation that religious education content alone does not guarantee behavioral transfer (Usman & Widyanto, 2019).

The reformed pedagogy that emerged over the following academic years restructured religious education around three concrete instructional mechanisms: mixed-affiliation cooperative learning groups deliberately composed to include students of different religions in every project task; guided cross-religious dialogue sessions in which students from different faith backgrounds jointly examined a shared social issue, such as environmental care or community service, from their respective religious perspectives before synthesizing a common action plan; and reflective journaling in which students recorded and discussed their personal experience of working with peers unlike themselves. This pattern of instructional redesign closely mirrors what comparative research on classroom diversity approaches identifies as the decisive pedagogical variable: whether diversity is treated as an active resource structured into learning tasks or merely acknowledged as a demographic backdrop (Civitillo et al., 2017). Teachers in this study specifically described how shifting from an assimilationist explanation of tolerance toward a genuinely integrative, task-based structure comparable to what has been called an integration approach to religious and ideological diversity in the classroom allowed students to encounter difference through shared purpose rather than through abstract description (Bender-Szymanski, 2012).

Importantly, this transformation was not confined to the religious education subject alone; it was reinforced through what several informants termed a "whole-school" alignment, in

which homeroom teachers, extracurricular supervisors, and school leadership consciously used religious moderation language and cooperative structures across contexts beyond the religion classroom, consistent with findings elsewhere that curricular integration of moderation values is strengthened when it permeates institutional practice rather than remaining confined to a single subject (Alfianur et al., 2024; Muamalah et al., 2024). Students themselves noted that the shift felt less like being taught a rule and more like being placed in situations where cooperating across religious lines was simply the normal way schoolwork got done, a description that aligns with the theoretical premise that experiential, dialogical pedagogy converts normative tolerance into practiced tolerance (Alhafizh & Setiawan, 2025).

Reconfiguring the Culture of Student Social Interaction

The second finding addresses the direct object of the research problem: how this pedagogical transformation reshaped students' everyday social interaction culture. Observational data indicated a marked shift in spontaneous, unsupervised association patterns. During break times and extracurricular activities observed toward the end of the fieldwork period, student groupings were considerably more religiously mixed than the pattern described by teachers as typical several years earlier, and several long-standing cross-religious friendships were reported by students as having originated directly from mixed cooperative learning groups rather than from prior neighborhood or family ties. This finding is consistent with international evidence that structured, task-based intergroup contact within schools functions as a strong catalyst for spontaneous cross-group friendship formation beyond the classroom (Civitillo et al., 2017), and it reinforces Indonesian findings that peer interaction, when supported by appropriately designed religious instruction, meaningfully shapes students' religious and social character (Muamalah et al., 2024; Rozi et al., 2025).

The transformation in interaction culture was also evident in students' communicative register. Interviewees described a shift from what one student called "careful, polite distance" toward more direct, humor inclusive, and personally disclosive communication with peers of different religions, a change teachers attributed to the cumulative effect of repeated, low-stakes collaborative tasks that normalized cross religious conversation as unremarkable. This trajectory parallels the concern raised in international literature that early-stage school integration can initially produce polite avoidance rather than genuine engagement, with authentic interaction only emerging once repeated, structured contact accumulates sufficient trust (Bender-Szymanski, 2012). In the present case, the multi-year duration of the pedagogical reform appears to have allowed the school to move past this initial, cautious phase toward more substantive interaction, a temporal dimension that is often underspecified in single-point-in-time surveys of school tolerance.

Nevertheless, the data also revealed important limits to this transformation, which prevents an overly optimistic reading of the findings. Micro exclusion subtle forms of religiously patterned preference in seating choice, invitation to informal social events outside school, and selection of closest confidants persisted in spaces least visible to teacher supervision, particularly outside the structured cooperative tasks. Several students candidly reported that while they now readily collaborated with peers of other religions on assignments, their innermost circle of close friends remained predominantly same-religion, a pattern consistent with the broader finding in comparative studies that formal school-based contact reduces overt exclusion far more reliably than it reshapes the deepest layer of intimate friendship choice (Haracemiv & Branco, 2018). This suggests that the culture of interaction was transformed unevenly: substantially at the level of collaborative and public interaction, but only partially at the level of private, elective friendship, an important qualification for schools and policymakers who might otherwise expect a uniform, total transformation from pedagogical reform alone.

Conditions Sustaining or Constraining the Transformation

The third finding concerns the conditions that enabled the transformation to take root and those that threatened its sustainability, directly addressing the study's third research question. Teacher pedagogical competence emerged as the single most frequently cited enabling factor: teachers who had received targeted training in facilitation, dialogical questioning, and conflict-sensitive group management were substantially more effective at sustaining productive cross-religious collaboration than those relying on ad hoc improvisation, corroborating earlier findings that the success of moderation-based religious instruction depends heavily on teachers' facilitation capacity rather than curriculum content alone (Alhafizh & Setiawan, 2025; Hasanuddin et al., 2025).

A second enabling condition was consistent, visible leadership commitment from the school principal, who institutionalized cross-affiliation grouping as a standing policy rather than leaving it to individual teacher discretion, and who allocated protected time in the extracurricular calendar for interfaith collaborative activities. This finding resonates with the concept of a whole-school approach to value education, in which strategic vision, curriculum, leadership, and school culture must move in alignment for value transformation to be durable rather than symbolic (Mariyono, 2024). Where such alignment was weaker for instance, in classes taught by teachers newly assigned to the school and not yet inducted into the reformed pedagogical approach students and teachers alike reported a partial reversion toward more segregated grouping patterns, underscoring that the transformation is a fragile institutional achievement rather than a permanent state.

A third and more subtle condition was the alignment, or lack thereof, between the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum operating through informal school routines, disciplinary practices, and unspoken social norms. Where informal school practices such

as default seating arrangements by class register, or unreflective scheduling of religious holiday observances that implicitly privileged the majority religion contradicted the inclusive intent of the formal religious moderation pedagogy, students perceived a credibility gap that teachers said undermined trust in the sincerity of the moderation program. This finding is consistent with research showing that the hidden curriculum functions as a powerful, often underexamined vehicle of character formation that can either reinforce or quietly contradict explicit values instruction (Umagap et al., 2022), and it echoes concerns that family religious environment outside school can also either reinforce or counteract school-based tolerance instruction depending on its degree of consonance with school values (Laelasari, 2022). Taken together, these findings indicate that transforming religious moderation pedagogy is necessary but not sufficient on its own; its capacity to reshape student interaction culture durably depends on teacher competence, sustained leadership commitment, and coherence between formal instruction and the school's everyday hidden curriculum, a triadic condition that offers a more complete explanatory account than curriculum only or teacher only analyses found in much of the prior literature (Ridho & Tumin, 2022; Rohmat, 2023; Ummi & Achadi, 2025).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how the pedagogy of religious moderation is transformed in a heterogeneous school and how that transformation reshapes the culture of student social interaction. The findings show that a shift from doctrinal, monological instruction toward dialogical, experience-based pedagogy anchored in mixed-affiliation cooperative learning, guided interfaith dialogue, and structured reflection produced a measurable change in students' interaction culture, evident in more spontaneous cross-religious collaboration, more direct and trusting everyday communication, and gradually more mixed informal groupings, although this change remained uneven, with intimate friendship choices proving more resistant to transformation than task-based collaboration. The durability of the transformation was found to depend jointly on teachers' pedagogical and facilitation competence, sustained and institutionalized leadership commitment, and coherence between the school's formal curriculum and its hidden curriculum of everyday routines and norms.

These findings carry both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study extends the literature on religious moderation by demonstrating that its transformative power on student social culture cannot be inferred from curricular

presence or normative promotion alone but must be traced through the specific pedagogical mechanisms that structure student contact. Practically, the study suggests that schools seeking to operationalize religious moderation should prioritize structured, sustained cross-affiliation cooperative learning over episodic moral instruction, invest in facilitation training for teachers across subjects rather than religious education teachers alone, and audit their hidden curriculum for latent inconsistencies with stated moderation values. Given the single-case design of this study, future research employing multi-site comparative case studies or longitudinal designs would help establish the extent to which these findings generalize across different regional, religious-majority, and socio-economic school contexts, and would allow closer examination of why intimate friendship formation appears more resistant to pedagogical intervention than collaborative task engagement.

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