MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL CULTURE: MEDIA TO INSTILL THE VALUES OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Multicultural school culture plays an important role in shaping the character of tolerant and moderate students in the midst of diversity. This study aims to analyze the cultural forms of multicultural schools that support the cultivation of religious moderation values in elementary schools. A qualitative approach with case study types is used to produce comprehensive research. Data collection techniques used participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results of the study show that there are three main forms of multicultural school culture that contribute to instilling the value of religious moderation, namely: (1) democratic culture; provide space for student participation, deliberation, and procedural justice; (2) positive social culture; building relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and solidarity; and (3) child-friendly culture; ensuring physical, psychological, and social security as a prerequisite for active participation. These three cultures complement each other and form an inclusive-multiculturalist education ecosystem, so that a multicultural value-based school culture is important as a systemic and transformative strategy in an effort to implement character education to strengthen religious moderation for elementary school students. This paper recommends strengthening school policies that support the systematic and collaborative implementation of multicultural culture between schools, families, and communities for the development of multicultural school culture as a medium to strengthen religious moderation. These findings are expected to be a reference for the development of multicultural education models and the strengthening of effective religious moderation, especially at the basic education level.

Keywords: multicultural school culture, value instilling, religious moderation

INTRODUCTION

Elementary school students are vulnerable to absorbing intolerant views from the surrounding environment. Some studies have found that discriminatory practices (Pratiwi et al., 2024), *negative* stereotypes (Nurfuaji & Erihadiana, 2023), and exclusionary attitudes (Safitri et al., 2023) have emerged since elementary school age. This shows that there is an urgent need to instill the values of religious moderation from an early age.

The development of technology and information contributes to the dissemination of content that does not necessarily reflect the spirit of tolerance. Meanwhile, elementary school-age children do not yet have the ability to critically filter information, because they are still in the early stages of moral development. (Winaya, 2019), and immature cognitive structures (Heni Purwulan, 2024). Elementary school-age children cannot yet think abstractly, making it difficult to filter out manipulative and ambiguous information (Newcombe, 2013). Research conducted (Roberts et al., 2021)   states that children aged 7-9 years are not yet able to reject false information in terms of reporting information from various sources, while children aged 10-12 years have begun to show sensitivity to the credibility of sources, especially when information comes from the internet.

In response to this situation, schools do not rely enough on classroom learning, but need to build an inclusive, dialogical, and respectful learning ecosystem as a medium for instilling value (Alim & Munib, 2021). A number of studies have shown the importance of moderation education through various approaches. Research (Noviani & Yanuarti, 2023) highlights the role of curriculum in strengthening the values of religious moderation. It also emphasizes the importance of teacher competence in delivering moderation materials to help moderate students' character (S. N. Sari et al., 2023). Previous research still focused on strengthening the curriculum and teacher competencies so that the value of religious moderation is better understood in the realm of concept than practice. Meanwhile, elementary school students are at a stage of cognitive and moral development that requires concrete examples, social habits, and hands-on experience to form attitudes. Because of these limitations, moral reinforcement can not only be done through the presentation of abstract concepts, but must be through habituation, *modeling*, and real social experience. As found (Wen et al., 2025) that the school environment and culture have a significant influence on internalizing values more deeply and sustainably. Thus, a multicultural school culture is a strategic need to present religious moderation as a real-life experience. Because school culture encompasses values, norms, symbols, and institutional practices that can effectively shape students' personalities through everyday social experiences (Mustafida et al., 2023). So that school culture functions as a "laboratory of values" that continuously stimulates students' cognitive, social, and moral development in an integrated manner and strengthens character formation.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach that does not stop at normative or pedagogical studies of religious moderation, but directly answers real challenges in elementary schools in the form of discriminatory practices, *negative stereotypes*, and exclusive attitudes that have not been touched by previous researchers. This research offers a concrete solution to the strategy of developing multicultural school culture through three main forms of culture that support the cultivation of religious moderation values in schools, namely democratic culture, positive social culture, and child-friendly culture which serves as a strategy to internalize moderation values, as a theoretical and practical contribution provided by this article.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method of case study type. The approach was chosen because the researcher has a strong interest in the specific context of elementary schools that apply multicultural culture as a medium to instill the value of religious moderation. So in accordance with the type of intrinsic study refers to (Wiseman & Hunt, 2008); and (Stake, 1995) that an intrinsic case study is a type of case study that prioritizes an in-depth understanding of a case because it is interesting, unique, and important to research. The research location is located in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Negeri 1 Malang City which has plural-multicultural characteristics, has a diversity of student backgrounds, especially parental education, economy, employment, religious beliefs, Islamic community organizations (Nahdlatul Ulama-Muhammadiyah), ethnicity, language, and social status. The location was chosen because it is considered representative and has real practices in building a school culture that fosters mutual respect as a medium to instill the value of religious moderation.

Data collection uses in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Observations were made to observe activities related to the multicultural school culture that was developed; such as classroom learning and school residents' habits in extracurricular and co-curricular activities such as talent interest development, creative stages, *market days*, and entrepreneurship weeks. Meanwhile, interview activities are carried out by determining the main informants including school principals, teachers, and students, with *snowball sampling* techniques to develop a network of informants according to field needs (Creswell, 2013). Among others; Interview with the principal about the policies and basic foundations of multicultural school culture development to the implementation of moderation values through school culture. Furthermore, data development is carried out to obtain information according to needs, especially related to the implementation of multicultural culture in schools and strategies developed by teachers. In addition, it was also confirmed to students regarding the data information obtained from the teacher. So that the information obtained not only describes the teacher's perspective, but also reflects the real experience of students in daily interaction. In this way, the data collected is more comprehensive, valid, and reflects factual conditions. This is

done for transparency and flexibility. Document analysis is used to support the information from interviews and observations. The documents analyzed included school policy documents in the form of vision and mission, curriculum and self-evaluation, and the monitoring book for the Development of Akhlakul Karimah, Ubudiyah, and Islamic Culture (PAKUBUMI).

Data analysis using interactive models (Miles, M.B, Huberman, A.M, and Saldana, 2014) includes; data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and conclusions drawn. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulate methods and sources by comparing information from various informants as well as supporting documents. At this stage, the information obtained from various informants such as principals, teachers, and students is systematically compared with observational findings and supporting documents to reach a consensus on the data**.** The *cross-examination process* ensures that each finding does not stand alone, but is validated by other sources. For example, the practice of democratic culture in schools such as the election of class leaders, student deliberation activities, or the fair division of tasks is not only observed directly in the field, but is also confirmed through teacher interviews about the implementation mechanism and matched with school policy documents which regulates the procedure of this activity. Thus, the suitability between practice, informant explanations, and written rules becomes a solid basis for ensuring that research findings truly reflect the application of multicultural culture and democratic values in daily school life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School culture refers to the quality of the school climate that is based on patterns of experience and reflects norms, goals, values, and interpersonal relationships (Cohen et al., 2009). A school culture that applies the principle of inclusivity can create a safe space (Banks, 2016) in an atmosphere of mutual respect (Judit;, 2024). A multicultural school culture involves cultural restructuring (Vervaet et al., 2018) and school practices with the principles of justice and diversity (Banks, 2004), upholding the principles of identity, and inclusion (Law, 2020), as well as accustoming school residents to coexist peacefully and actively respect differences (Sleeter, 2001). This meaning is relevant to the need to implement religious moderation in schools; so that students are able to understand and behave not to extremes (Chen, 2010).

In the context of basic education, school culture not only functions as a social foundation (Mustafida et al., 2023), but also as a strategic medium in shaping the character of students (Hidayati et al., 2022). This is done to reduce discrimination and operationalize culturally responsive teaching practices (Banks, 2004); (Burtonwood, 2006); (Parker, 2019). This understanding shows the significant role of multicultural school culture in instilling the values of religious moderation at the elementary school level, and recognizing cultural diversity and fostering harmony (Alzoubi;, 2025). Based on the results of this study, the form of multicultural school culture that is effective as a medium for instilling the value of religious moderation

includes: 1) Democratic culture, 2) positive social culture, and 3) child-friendly culture as explained below.

Culture of democracy

One of the important pillars in a multicultural school culture is the culture *of democracy*. That is a school climate that provides participatory space and freedom to voice opinions, discuss openly, and be involved in joint decision-making (Agustina et al., 2022). This approach is in line with the principle *of deliberation* in Islamic teachings and is a manifestation of the value *of tawasuth* or a middle way, which rejects extreme attitudes (Husain, 2020), as the main principle in religious moderation (Sutrisno, 2019).

The practice of democratic culture in MIN I Malang City, is illustrated from school life, where students are given the opportunity to submit ideas during learning activities in the classroom and outside the classroom. As during PKn learning in grade IV, teachers held an election simulation through the election of class leaders. Students get the right to vote in secret. This act provides democratic learning through direct experience (Lind, 2023) which is a key element in *Dewey*'s transactional realism. The teacher also explained that each choice should be respected, even if it is different. Meanwhile, outside of learning, it can be seen when class events will be held. Such as entrepreneurship week, *market day*, school birthday, and work to strengthen the profile of Pancasila (P5) students. Teachers facilitate large group discussions, ensuring all children have equal speaking time that is relevant to the concept *of equity pedagogy* (Banks, 2010). This is done to determine the role of students in the *event* of their own volition. The principal emphasized that this mechanism is part of the habituation of *deliberation* which is carried out at least twice every semester. This is done to strengthen relationships (Suwadi, 2017), and build communication between elements (Amin, 2017), which serves to strengthen inclusivity, connect different perspectives, and build mutual understanding as the basis for harmonizing school life (H. P. Sari et al., 2023).

This is relevant to the view (TAYIB et al., 2023) that schools that develop a culture of democracy will provide forums such as class meetings, group discussions, student forums, and representatives of school boards or committees. Through these dialogue spaces, school residents not only learn to convey ideas politely, but also learn to listen, respect the opinions of others, and reach a common consensus. This is a real experience of democracy education from an early age, which is in line with the *value of religious moderation*. A democratic culture is realized not only as a daily habit, but also as a structured system, and there are supportive rules. These findings emphasize the importance of hands-on experience*, active participation*, and a dialogical learning environment. So it can be said that *deliberation* and dialogue are real practices in democratic interaction in school life. Dialogue is a means of building understanding across differences (Karadağ & Demirtaş, 2018). As Banks emphasizes in (Camicia, 2007) that *"Interactive dialogue that takes place in a multicultural school environment is an important prerequisite for*

fostering civic values and religious tolerance." Dialogue can also encourage the development *of critical awareness* as well as *social empathy.* This view reinforces the meaning of democratic culture, because every student feels that his or her voice is valued and his or her right to be different is protected. It is relevant to the theory of democratic education (Dewey, 1938) that education is the main tool to instill democratic values. This view emphasizes the importance of active participation, hands-on experience, cooperation, and problem-solving in education. Reject authoritarian and passive approaches. A democratic school culture provides space for students to learn to deliberate, voice opinions, and live together in diversity (Larsen & Mathé, 2023).

These findings show that schools succeed in creating *safe and equal* public spaces (Servaes, 2020), so that students learn participatory skills from an early age. In addition, student involvement in decision-making has been proven to be in line with the principles of *deliberative democratic education* as stated by Gutmann & Thompson (2004**)** in (Follesdal, 2017), namely getting students used to being involved in the process of rational argumentation, listening to each other, and finding *common ground*). This process is directly related to the principle *of tawasuth* (middle way) in religious moderation, which rejects extremism and promotes mutual agreement. A democratic culture also encourages the formation of collaborative structures (Larsen & Mathé, 2023), habits of critical and inclusive thinking, and fostering a healthy appreciation for differences of opinion (Nasution et al., 2020). As well as strengthening *awareness of diversity* in society and creating an inclusive and fair school environment (*Empowering School Culture*) (Banks, 2016).

Positive social culture

The development of a school culture based on the value of moderation needs to be developed to create positive social relations as a characteristic of building a multicultural culture (Raymond, 2014). In the context of increasingly heterogeneous primary education, creating a multicultural school culture is inevitable. This culture is not only based on a formal curriculum, but is also built through social interaction (Cohen et al., 2009). One of the main indicators of the successful implementation of multicultural culture in schools is the creation of *positive social relationships* between individuals from different backgrounds. Positive social relationships reflect the success of schools in fostering the values of mutual respect, cooperation, and empathy as the foundation of living together in diversity (Mustafida, 2011). These relationships foster a sense of security, mutual respect, and encourage students to learn and grow in an environment free from discrimination. According to (Bank, 2004), an effective multicultural school not only instills knowledge about diversity, but also facilitates healthy and equitable cross-cultural social interaction.

Interaction between school residents is built on the principles of mutual respect, empathy, and collaboration. Some of the positive social culture indicators found include: the

results of interviews with grade 4 teachers explained that as teachers, they must actively mediate conflicts between students with a dialogue and peaceful resolution approach, not physical or verbal punishment. In addition, students are encouraged to help each other, especially in heterogeneous group learning. As the following interview excerpt: *"We always remind children that differences are friends, not reasons to stay away. If there are difficulties, we help together."* This culture is socialized to the entire madrasah community and also the parents of students. Every month, students' social behavior is monitored by the school through the book Development of Akhlakul Karimah, Ubudiyah, and Islamic Culture signed by parents and teachers. This is done to familiarize oneself with positive social relationship behavior.

A positive social culture is built to create a sense of security and acceptance that is a prerequisite for the success of *equity pedagogy* (Munalim, 2020), as well as encouraging students to build empathy for social realities (Suwadi, 2017) that are relevant to strengthen religious moderation. Teachers and principals act as agents who create spaces for open social interaction, such as interfaith dialogue forums, cross-cultural activities, and collaborative projects (Noviana et al., 2022). Learning is only effective when it occurs in a positive psychological climate, i.e. when learners feel appreciated, accepted, and understood empathically (Elsayed & Hartley, 2005). Positive social relationships are formed through meanings built in the daily interactions of Blumer 1996 in (Rauty, 2019). In this context, teachers need to develop *humanistic approaches* (Islamy, 2022), such as *student-centered learning*, the use of non-discriminatory language, and the application of the principle of justice in classroom management (Gafur, 2022). In addition, emotional support for students from minority groups must be actively provided, so that they do not feel alienated. This emphasizes the positive relationship to students' emotional well-being, which is the foundation for accepting and appreciating differences (Usman, 2018). Positive social culture also supports the values of *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *ta'awun* (help) (Dodego & Witro, 2020).

Respectful interactions teach students that differences are not a threat, but rather an opportunity to work together. Just as the school is committed to building healthy relationships between school residents. One of them is through *morning greeting activities* every morning. All teachers greet the students at the school gate with a heartfelt greeting while bowing. It is aimed at building emotions and creating a warm atmosphere from the beginning of the arrival of students. Outside of these activities, the school actively encourages students to empathize with people outside of their homogeneous backgrounds. For example, the religious moderation declaration event, where the school invites students from six different religions (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism) from school representatives in Malang City openly vows to maintain harmony. This reflects how schools institutionally function as a bridge of social capital between different groups. By involving interfaith students in this declaration, MIN 1 Malang City actualizes the practice of *bridging social capital* (Putnam,

2000) not only instilling the value of tolerance in learning, but also creating experiences and commitments to coexist in diversity. This is in accordance with the dimensions of multicultural education of Banks (Banks, 2016), especially in the dimensions *of Equity Pedagogy*, *Prejudice Reduction*, and *Empowering School Culture*. Furthermore, a positive social culture not only strengthens social cohesion in schools (Theguh Saumantri, 2023), but also internalizes the principles of religious moderation (Hidayati et al., 2022). Through inclusive daily interactions, students learn about how to respect differences of views and beliefs. practicing empathy and care across identity boundaries. This includes resolving differences through dialogue, not conflict.

Child-Friendly Culture

Good education is not only oriented to knowledge transfer, but also builds *relational ethics*, which is a relationship based on empathy, care, and respect for the dignity of every child. This approach ensures that all students, feel valued and protected. The child-friendly culture developed by MIN I Malang City is part of a learning approach that is applied with a holistic paradigm to create a friendly and fun learning environment. It is evidenced by the commitment to be an ideal place for students to develop their potential. As stated by the head of the madrasah that in an effort to realize a child-friendly school program and prioritize children's rights. Such as a one-day program of learning outside the classroom, anti-bullying education , and learning strategy diagnostic tests.

These efforts are relevant to the indicators of the Indonesian Ministry of Education's child-friendly school policy which includes; 1) the existence of policies that are in favor of children, 2) educators and education personnel trained in children's rights, 3) child-friendly teaching and learning processes, 3) adequate infrastructure, and 4) active participation of children and all school residents as well as support from outside the school. This indicator is used to guarantee, fulfill, respect children's rights and protect children from violence, discrimination, and other mistreatment (Yosada & Kurniati, 2019). This is in accordance with the objectives of national education, the 1945 Constitution, Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System and the Principles of Child Protection. So that the formation of a child-friendly environment and culture is a necessity to support and protect children.

This policy strengthens efforts to build a multicultural culture in schools, because the protection provided is not only in the physical aspect, but also in the fair treatment of all students without discrimination of religion, gender, or ethnicity. In practice, this policy is often integrated with the curriculum carrying the principle *of student agency* giving students vote, choice, and control over their learning process. This is relevant to the theory *of Pedagogy of Care* (Nel Noddings, 1984, 2012) in (Rodés et al., 2021) that education should be centered on caring relationships. Teachers are not only teachers, but *caregivers* who understand the emotional needs

of students. This means that education is not enough to just convey knowledge, but must build *relational ethics* of teacher-student relationships based on empathy, care, and personal attention. So that teachers can recognize the needs of students.

Findings (Shodiq & Mahmudah, 2019) on a psychologically safe school environment increase students' active participation in cross-group activities. The results of this study identify that child-friendly culture is a form of multicultural school culture that is significant in instilling the value of religious moderation. This culture is reflected in the creation of a safe, inclusive, and discrimination-free environment (Alia, 2022). The friendly attitude of teachers, staff, and school leaders is not only an example of tolerant behavior, but also a mechanism for internalizing moderation values such as *tawasuth* (middle way), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *ta'awun* (help-help) (S. N. Sari et al., 2023). The emphasis on student safety is also an important part of developing a child-friendly culture and encouraging the active participation of all students without discrimination. These findings emphasize the empathic and caring relationship between teachers and learners. Teachers play the role of *the one-caring* who actively respond to the emotional and academic needs of students. A caring environment facilitates the growth of a sense of psychological security, which is a prerequisite for the formation of a tolerant and moderate attitude. The *child-centered* and *inclusive* principles of CFS (UNICEF, 2009) are also relevant to these findings because they emphasize the active involvement of children in the learning process, respect for their rights, and the elimination of all forms of violence.

Child-friendly schools provide space for children to express their identity without feeling threatened or marginalized (Rodés et al., 2021). Just as a sense of security to express oneself arises when students are confident that the school will not judge, demean, or exclude them based on their identity. For example, when the religious moderation declaration activity invites students from six different religions to appear equal in one public space. It can indirectly create *trust*, ensuring that all students have a safe space to display their identities without the threat of discrimination (*Equity pedagogy*). This is in line with the principle of inclusivity because it encourages equal participation regardless of cultural background or beliefs (Rohmat et al., 2023). What supports the implementation of humanist education theory is that humanistic-oriented education prioritizes unconditional *positive regard*, empathy, and appreciation for the unique potential of each child. These values are in line with religious moderation that values differences (Bernadić, 2023). It is relevant to the spirit of multicultural education that demands the creation of justice, equal access, and respect for plurality (Munalim, 2020). So that a child-friendly culture becomes a practical instrument to realize these principles at the elementary school level. Because education must ensure equity and equality through the recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity. On this basis, a child-friendly culture provides a solid foundation for the cultivation of religious moderation values. Covering the four pillars of

religious moderation (Ministry of Religion, 2019) *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *deliberation* naturally grow in an inclusive environment.

Based on the analysis of the findings and theories above, child-friendly culture is not only morally or ethically relevant, but also has academic legitimacy. Its existence reinforces the cognitive dimension for students to learn to appreciate different perspectives through safe and inclusive interactions. The affective dimension for the formation of empathy, respect, and willingness to cooperate across differences. and the social dimension to build positive relationships between students, teachers, and society. Based on the findings of multicultural school culture forms that support the cultivation of religious moderation values, it shows that there are three cultural pillars that are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, namely: 1) *Culture of democracy,* 2) *Positive Social Culture and* 3) *Child-Friendly Culture.* As shown in the following picture:
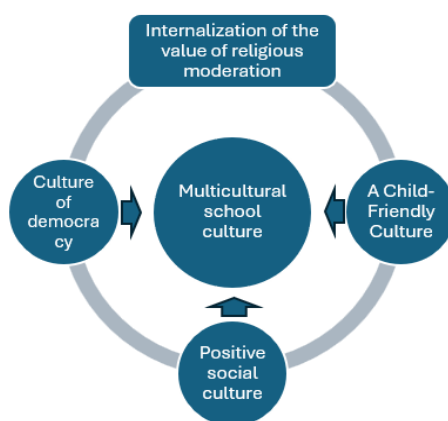

Figure 1. The form of multicultural school culture that supports the process of internalizing the value of religious moderation

The three cultures form an educational ecosystem that is inclusive, safe, and supports the growth of religious moderation values. The culture of democracy in schools encourages *student agency* through spaces of participation, open dialogue, and collective decision-making. The value of deliberation and *tawasuth* (middle way) is an integral part of problem solving. This participation builds awareness that differences of opinion are natural, as well as instilling the principles of justice and equality. A positive social culture emphasizes harmonious interpersonal relationships, empathy, and social support. Within the framework of *social capital theory* (Kim & Kim, 2017) strong social relationships in schools increase trust and strengthen networks of solidarity. This positive interaction becomes a medium for internalizing the values of tolerance and justice which are the core of religious moderation. With this culture, students not only learn to accept differences, but also actively protect the rights of their peers. A child-friendly culture ensures that all students feel safe physically, psychologically, and socially. The *care pedagogy*

approach and *the Child-Friendly Schools framework* create an environment that protects and empowers students, so that they have the courage to participate in school life. A safe environment facilitates the growth of the value of religious moderation through the real-life experience of interacting inclusively without discrimination. So that the relationship between these three cultures complements each other: A democratic culture provides *a voice space* and guarantees justice, a positive social culture builds *relationships of trust* and a sense of belonging with each other, and a child-friendly culture *provides a sense of security* which is a prerequisite for active participation. This integration creates *a school climate* that is in line with the values of moderation and the principles of multicultural education.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that multicultural school culture has a strategic role in instilling the value of religious moderation in elementary schools. There are three main forms of culture that support the cultivation of the value of religious moderation in schools, namely democratic culture, positive social culture, and child-friendly culture. Conceptually, the three complement each other in forming a multicultural educational environment. The culture of democracy provides space for students to voice their opinions, dialogue, and participate in decision-making fairly, thereby instilling the value of deliberation and *tawasuth* (middle way). A positive social culture builds relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and solidarity, which is a strong foundation for harmonious coexistence. A child-friendly culture ensures physical, psychological, and social safety, so that learners feel safe to actively participate in social interactions and learning. These three cultures form a school ecosystem that supports the creation of a multicultural school culture. Therefore, the implementation of the three cultures needs to be strengthened through clear school policies, continuous teacher training, active student participation, and collaboration with parents and *stakeholders* to produce a moderate, inclusive, and characterful generation of the nation.

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