

## Inclusive Religious Education and Interfaith Interaction: Strengthening Religious Moderation through Teachers' Lived Experiences in Multi-Religious State Schools

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**ABSTRACT:** *The religious diversity in Indonesia requires a strong understanding of religious moderation, especially in educational settings. Religious moderation is crucial to fostering social harmony and preventing religion-based conflicts. This study aims to explore and understand how the reinforcement of religious moderation is implemented in religious education practices at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo, located in Mbawa Village. The research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to examine the experiences of teachers and students in applying religious moderation values. The sample consists of 8 religious education teachers (Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) and 24 students from various religious backgrounds, selected purposively based on their involvement in religious education. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations over one month in 2025. The data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques to identify key patterns related to religious moderation in learning. The findings indicate that strengthening religious moderation in education is carried out through integrating tolerance values into the curriculum, an inclusive approach in religious instruction, and harmonious social interactions among students of different faiths. This study highlights the role of education in fostering religious moderation through inclusive learning and interfaith dialogue. Its limitation lies in the narrow scope of two schools, which may affect generalizability. The originality of this study is its focus on teachers' lived experiences as practical strategies for strengthening religious moderation, whereas previous studies mostly remained theoretical or policy-oriented.*

Keberagaman agama di Indonesia membutuhkan pemahaman yang kuat tentang moderasi beragama, terutama dalam konteks pendidikan. Moderasi beragama sangat penting untuk membina kerukunan sosial dan mencegah konflik berbasis agama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan memahami bagaimana penguatan moderasi beragama diimplementasikan dalam praktik pendidikan agama di Sekolah Menengah Atas Negeri 2

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Donggo dan Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri 2 Donggo, yang terletak di Desa Mbawa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi untuk mengkaji pengalaman guru dan siswa dalam menerapkan nilai-nilai moderasi beragama. Sampel terdiri dari 8 guru pendidikan agama (Islam, Katolik, dan Protestan) dan 24 siswa dari berbagai latar belakang agama, dipilih secara *purposif* berdasarkan keterlibatan mereka dalam pendidikan agama. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi langsung selama satu bulan pada tahun 2025. Data dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola kunci terkait moderasi beragama dalam pembelajaran. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penguatan moderasi beragama dalam pendidikan dilakukan melalui integrasi nilai-nilai toleransi ke dalam kurikulum, pendekatan inklusif dalam pengajaran agama, dan interaksi sosial yang harmonis antar siswa yang berbeda keyakinan. Studi ini menyoroti peran pendidikan dalam mendorong moderasi beragama melalui pembelajaran inklusif dan dialog antaragama. Keterbatasannya terletak pada cakupan dua sekolah yang sempit, yang dapat memengaruhi generalisasi. Orisinalitas studi ini terletak pada fokusnya pada pengalaman hidup guru sebagai strategi praktis untuk memperkuat moderasi beragama, sementara studi-studi sebelumnya sebagian besar masih berorientasi teoretis atau kebijakan.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Education, Interfaith Interaction, Religious Moderation, Life Experience, Multifaith State Schools.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As the world's largest archipelagic country, Indonesia has an extensive territory with more than 17,000 islands stretching from Sabang to Merauke. Its strategic location between two oceans and two continents makes it a maritime nation rich in natural resources and cultural diversity. Indonesia consists of 38 provinces, each with a unique blend of religions, ethnicities, languages, customs, and traditions deeply rooted in the lives of its people (Ginting & Saunders, 2021). This diversity is one of Indonesia's distinctive characteristics, passed down through generations. As an agrarian country, most Indonesians work in the agricultural sector, which serves as the backbone of the people's economy.

Additionally, the marine and fisheries sector also plays a crucial role in supporting the national economy, especially for communities living in coastal and island regions. Indonesia's diversity is a blessing from God that must be understood, appreciated, and preserved for future generations. In religious teachings, particularly Islam, tolerance and diversity hold profound meanings. In the Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat, Verse 13, Allah Swt explains that humanity was created with differences so that they may know one another and that the most honourable in His sight is the one who is most righteous (Ruslan & Luthfiyah, 2020).

This concept reflects the importance of a life filled with social awareness, cooperation, and mutual respect as an implementation of the values of brotherhood and humanity. These values should serve as a guiding principle for society to build a peaceful and

harmonious life, regardless of differences. However, despite its rich diversity, Indonesia is not immune to issues of extremism and social conflicts, which often relate to ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations. Several major conflicts, such as those in Ambon, Poso, and Lampung, have demonstrated tensions that can threaten national unity and cohesion. These conflicts are often triggered by misunderstandings, discrimination, and a lack of awareness and tolerance in dealing with differences. Various efforts are needed to strengthen the values of national unity and solidarity through educational and socio-cultural approaches (Banban, 2018).

Amid these various challenges, some regions in Indonesia have successfully maintained religious harmony despite their high religious and cultural diversity. One such example is the community of Mbawa Village in Donggo District, Bima Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. The Donggo ethnic group, adherents of Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, inhabits this village. Despite their differences in faith, the people of Mbawa Village continue to coexist peacefully and harmoniously (Aksa & Nurhayati, 2020). They uphold the values of togetherness and tolerance taught in their respective religions, particularly in Islam, which follows the example of the life of Prophet Muhammad Saw. The history of the Prophet's life in Medina illustrates how Islam coexisted peacefully with other religions in an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony (Banban, 2018).

Likewise, the community of Mbawa Village has social mechanisms to maintain harmony, such as traditions of cooperation and deliberation in resolving various social issues (Fahmi et al., 2021). However, although the tolerance practised by the people of Mbawa is relatively strong, challenges in sustaining interreligious harmony persist. External factors such as technological advancement, the spread of inaccurate information, and the influence of certain groups may threaten social stability. Even simple miscommunication can trigger conflicts that have the potential to disrupt the harmony that has been established thus far.

Therefore, concrete efforts are needed to strengthen religious moderation to build a more inclusive and tolerant society. Religious moderation is an attitude of avoiding extremism or excessiveness in practising religion, while respecting the existence of others with different beliefs (Miharja, 2023). Ideally, this effort should be introduced early through formal education in schools, as schools serve as strategic spaces to instil tolerance, harmony, and respect for religious diversity among students. Education based on religious moderation can foster a younger generation with a broader understanding of diversity, enabling them to avoid intolerance and extremism (Fasyiransyah et al., 2025). Thus, there is a gap between *das sein* (reality: the harmony in Mbawa Village that remains vulnerable to disruption) and *das sollen* (ideal: the strengthening of religious moderation through education), which needs to be bridged through systematic and sustainable educational strategies (Saefudin & Fatihah, 2020).

In Mbawa Village, schools such as State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo play a crucial role in creating an educational environment that fosters interfaith harmony. Students from different religious backgrounds, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, at these schools can study together in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. Through Islamic Education and other subjects, it is expected that the values of religious moderation can be instilled in students, helping them grow into individuals who understand the importance of harmony and respect for others (Maya et al., 2023). This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the

reinforcement of religious moderation in religious education practices in Mbawa Village, Donggo, particularly at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of local Islamic Education teachers, this study seeks to identify effective ways to strengthen religious moderation in school education practices. The selection of State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo serves as research sites to enrich the data, not as a basis for multi-case comparison.

Additionally, this research is expected to significantly contribute to developing educational programs that promote interfaith harmony at the school level. Thus, this study is relevant in examining the implementation of religious moderation in education, especially in diverse communities like Mbawa Village, Donggo. The findings are anticipated to inspire other regions facing similar challenges in maintaining social harmony and religious diversity.

## II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design under the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm emphasises that social reality is constructed through individuals' subjective experiences, making it suitable for exploring how teachers and students perceive and internalise religious moderation in school settings. The research was conducted at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo, two rural schools in Bima Regency with notable religious diversity. Phenomenology was chosen to capture the essence of lived experiences related to interfaith interactions in education (Safarudin et al., 2023). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Informants included eight religious education teachers (four Islamic, two Catholic, and two Protestant) and twenty-four students from Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant backgrounds. Participants were selected purposively based on their experience and involvement in religious education activities that promote tolerance. Interview questions explored how moderation values are taught, challenges faced in diverse classrooms, and experiences of interfaith interaction. Observations focused on classroom dynamics and school activities, while documentation involved the analysis of lesson plans, syllabi, school mission statements, and character education programs. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and investigators. Source triangulation compared teacher and student perspectives; method triangulation combined interviews, observations, and documents; and investigator triangulation involved peer debriefing to maintain analytical consistency. Thematic analysis, based on the framework of Roosinda et al. (2021), was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to implementing religious moderation in both schools.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The efforts of religious moderation carried out by Islamic, Protestant, and Catholic religious teachers include providing advice and guidance on tolerance and mutual care to students, especially towards their peers of different faiths. Even during the teaching and learning, students are given equal rights to ask questions, discuss, and exchange opinions with their peers (Asmara & Firman, 2023). Furthermore, this is supported by strengthening the understanding of other religions, such as in *Imtaq* activities, where

students are provided with separate rooms to receive spiritual guidance according to their respective beliefs. Liando & Hadirman (2022) with religious moderation in place, the school environment becomes harmonious and peaceful, allowing students to interact and play together without sentiment or conflict. This strengthens religious moderation efforts, fostering a more harmonious and inclusive school environment.

The findings of this study highlight various strategies and experiences in promoting religious moderation at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo. Islamic Education teachers and Catholic and Protestant religious education teachers played complementary yet distinct roles in shaping students' interfaith tolerance. One Islamic Education teacher at State Senior High School 2 Donggo shared: *"Teaching religious moderation in a multi-religious school demands patience and wisdom. Before entering into doctrinal differences, I always emphasise common human values like honesty, respect, and justice. This helps students focus on what unites them first."*

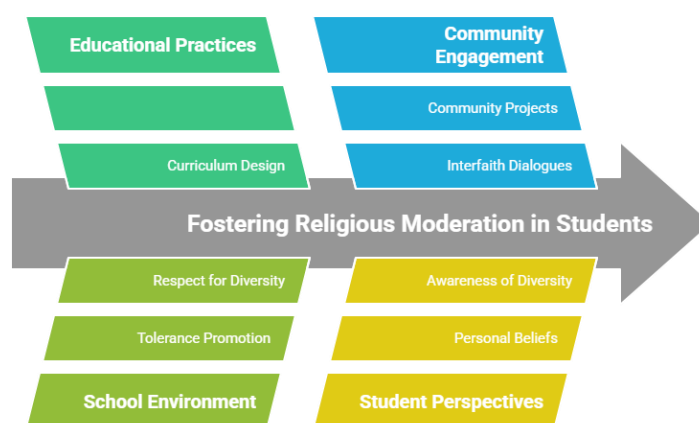
This teacher explained that building an atmosphere of mutual respect is continuous and that interfaith dialogue is often encouraged through collaborative projects and shared class discussions. Another Islamic Education teacher at State Junior High School 2 Donggo reflected on the challenges: *"Sometimes students bring rigid ideas from home or the internet. We must redirect their mindset without forcing by presenting alternative views rooted in tolerance and Islamic compassion."* She reported using contextual stories and comparing verses across religions that promote peace and kindness to break down prejudice and encourage curiosity. Non-Muslim teachers also played a significant role. A Catholic teacher shared: *"I often collaborate with the PAI teacher to design inter-class discussions, especially before national holidays. This helps students realise that being different in faith does not mean being divided in humanity."* Meanwhile, a Protestant teacher emphasised promoting mutual listening: *"In my classroom, we practice respectful listening. I teach students that understanding others does not mean agreeing with them, but it shows maturity and empathy."*

Students echoed these values. One Muslim student at State Senior High School 2 Donggo stated, *"I used to think students of other religions worship differently because they are wrong. However, after our religion teachers explained it, I realised that our differences are part of God's will, and I learned to respect them."* A Catholic student added, *"We feel included. The Islamic teachers do not treat us differently, and we are sometimes invited to join discussions about shared values like helping the poor or being honest."* Observational data confirmed the presence of inclusive teaching practices. For instance, during one observed Islamic Education lesson at State Senior High School 2 Donggo, the teacher invited students from different faiths to discuss a moral case study about helping needy neighbours. Students contributed perspectives from their own religions, and the teacher validated all answers, reinforcing values of empathy and cooperation. Moreover, interfaith group activities, such as school clean-up days and tolerance-themed poster projects, involved mixed religious student teams.

These activities fostered teamwork and informal learning about each other's beliefs. The distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim teachers was evident in their instructional focus. Muslim Islamic Education teachers emphasised Qur'anic values of tolerance and *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, while Catholic and Protestant teachers emphasised shared ethical values from their respective traditions. However, all teachers displayed a commitment to fostering respectful interfaith relations.

## Religious Life of Students at School

Religious life at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo reflects harmony despite students' religious diversity, including Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Despite their different religious backgrounds, students coexist peacefully by respecting and upholding tolerance in school and the community. Religious education in both schools emphasises the values of tolerance, with each teacher instilling the principle of respect for other religions. This approach helps foster an inclusive and harmonious school environment, where students learn to appreciate diversity and build strong interfaith relationships. Through these efforts, State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo continue to promote unity and mutual understanding among students of different beliefs. This reflects the concept of multicultural education, which prioritises mutual understanding and social integration among different religious groups (Hidayah, 2021; Ruslan & Luthfiyah, 2020). Islamic religious teachers emphasise unity in diversity, while Protestant and Catholic teachers instil values of love and peace among people of different faiths (Ahid, 2023). This approach fosters a positive attitude among students, encouraging them to respect one another despite their differences in belief. Additionally, religious activities such as *Imtaq (Iman dan Takwa)* for Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic students are integral to the school's routine every Friday at State Senior High School 2 Donggo. These activities allow students to deepen their faith while strengthening interfaith harmony, ensuring that religious diversity becomes a unifying force rather than a source of division (Hamdani, 2024).



**Figure 1.** Increasing religious moderation in education

Each student can practice their religious teachings according to their respective beliefs. These activities, carried out with full respect for religious differences, create a more inclusive atmosphere and strengthen the understanding of the importance of religious tolerance. A critical comparison with previous studies reveals both points of convergence and divergence that help position this research within the broader academic discourse on religious moderation in education. The study by Al-Mujtahid et al. (2022) emphasised the integration of religious moderation into the curriculum of Islamic education in urban schools, primarily through formal content and policy frameworks. In contrast, the present study adopts a phenomenological lens to examine how religious moderation is internalised and practised in everyday educational interactions within rural, religiously diverse schools, namely State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo. Similarly, Luthfiyah et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of structured extracurricular programs in fostering religious moderation;

however, this study finds that in settings with limited institutional resources, such as Mbawa Village, these values are more often cultivated organically through informal teacher-student interactions and contextual learning practices.

At State Senior High School 2 Donggo, a similar situation is observed. Students from different religious backgrounds do not feel alienated or discriminated against. The school actively plays a role in fostering an environment that supports tolerance and unity. Religious teachers at State Junior High School 2 Donggo guide mutual respect and coexistence despite differences in belief. In addition to religious lessons that instil these values, social activities such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and community service further strengthen relationships among students of different faiths. The religious life of students in both schools extends beyond formal education, shaping a culture of inclusivity and harmony in their daily interactions.

Life outside of school, such as social interactions within the home and community, also plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes of tolerance and mutual respect. Parents of students at both schools instil important values such as family unity, solidarity, and respect for religious differences. This is reflected in students' strong sense of solidarity in social activities and daily life. The religious life of students at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo can be said to be running well, supported by the reinforcement of religious moderation implemented by the school, teachers, and families. Students at both schools demonstrate mutual respect, harmony, and coexistence, maintaining unity despite their religious differences.

**Table 1. The form of religious moderation of students**

| Description                              | Information                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tolerance in Daily Life                  | Students from Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant backgrounds can live side by side without conflict, respecting each other and maintaining good relationships within the environment of State Junior High School 2 Donggo and State Senior High School 2 Donggo, as well as in the community. |
| Joint Participation in School Activities | Students from Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant backgrounds participate together in various school activities without discrimination, reflecting an attitude of mutual respect.                                                                                                              |
| Respecting Differences                   | Students demonstrate an open attitude and do not let religious differences hinder the establishment of friendships or cooperation.                                                                                                                                                           |

### **Implementation of Religious Moderation in Religious Education at School**

Implementing religious moderation in religious education at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo aims to create a harmonious atmosphere among students from diverse religious backgrounds. In this context, Islamic Religious Education, Protestant Christian Religious Education, and Catholic Religious Education play a crucial role in shaping students' understanding and attitudes so they can live peacefully together despite having different beliefs. Religious education at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo teaches religious values and emphasises the importance of tolerance and mutual respect among people of different faiths. This approach helps prevent potential conflicts due to religious differences, ensuring that students grow into individuals who uphold harmony, respect, and peaceful coexistence in their school environment and society.

In the application of religious moderation, the role of religious teachers is crucial. Islamic Religious Education teachers emphasise the delivery of moderate Islamic teachings, which prioritise peace, tolerance, and respect for differences (Adawiyah & Z, 2016; Huda, 2024). The importance of the role of religious teachers in implementing religious moderation in schools has been widely studied. One relevant study shows that religious teachers have a central role in instilling the values of tolerance and peace in students. Through an inclusive and non-coercive approach, these teachers can help students understand that Islam, as a moderate religion, teaches peace and harmony in interacting with others, regardless of religious differences (Munir, 2025).

Likewise, in Protestant Christian religious education, the teaching aims to provide students with an understanding of the values of Christian teachings that encourage compassion, peace, and mutual respect. Protestant religious teachers emphasise the importance of maintaining good manners and guiding students to avoid potential conflicts due to differences in beliefs (Horowski, 2020). On the other hand, Catholic religious education also focuses on instilling love and understanding towards others, including those with different beliefs. Catholic religious teachers strive to create mutual respect among students and maintain harmonious relationships despite religious differences. Strengthening religious moderation in Catholic religious education also includes encouragement to carry out religious routines, such as praying before starting activities (Fahmi et al., 2021). Teachers' role in educating students to live peacefully together and respect differences is increasingly relevant given the challenges faced in today's multicultural society (Yana et al., 2024). As revealed in the study, Christian religious teachers' role in instilling religious moderation values can create a more inclusive and tolerant school atmosphere (Prasetyo, 2024).

In this case, the teacher is tasked with educating students to live with mutual respect and avoid attitudes or actions that can offend others, especially those related to religious differences. This education emphasises that religious differences do not prevent us from living in harmony as fellow human beings (Suryana & Maryana, 2023).

Instead of presenting the data in a graphic format, which is more appropriate for quantitative research, the findings regarding students' understanding of religious moderation at State Senior High School 2 Donggo are more accurately conveyed through direct interview excerpts. For example, one student expressed, "*We teach respect for friends of different religions, as we also have non-Muslim students at this school. Teachers always remind us that all religions teach goodness.*" Another student stated, "*I have become more open and don't easily judge people by their religion. We often discuss in class the importance of living in harmony.*" These quotes reflect a deepening awareness among students regarding the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence, which are central to the concept of religious moderation. Presenting data this way aligns with the phenomenological approach used in this study, which prioritises participants' subjective experiences and personal interpretations.

Implementing religious moderation in religious education at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo has created a harmonious atmosphere despite the diversity of religions among students. Religious teachers, who come from various backgrounds such as Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism, play an important role in instilling values of tolerance and respect for differences. They teach students to respect each other, live in peace, and maintain harmony despite differences in beliefs (Bimagfiranda et al., 2024). In both schools, religious activities such as *Imtak* for



Muslim students, as well as Protestants and Catholics, have significantly contributed to strengthening religious moderation (Antonsich, 2014).

The prayer routine carried out every morning, which is adjusted to each student's religion, strengthens the value of mutual respect and creates a more inclusive atmosphere at school. This activity helps students deepen their religious teachings and provides space for mutual respect and coexistence in diversity.

The implementation of religious moderation at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo is also further strengthened by the strong values of family brotherhood and closeness of the environment, especially during the harvest season, and various local customs, traditions and cultural events in Donggo Mbawa that emphasise mutual cooperation, mutual respect, and togetherness as the foundation in strengthening relations between religious communities, while also supporting the creation of a harmonious atmosphere in the school environment of State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo. The harvest season for marriage, which is often followed by a large celebration involving many parties from various religious backgrounds, is a real example of how the Donggo community can prioritise the principle of togetherness. In this event, even though religious differences are very clearly visible, the community still supports each other and participates in the celebration, both in preparation and implementation. Religious differences do not prevent them from working together, providing support, and maintaining the values of togetherness that have long been embedded in local culture (Enoh et al., 2023).

This creates an inclusive atmosphere where students and the community can learn to respect each other and collaborate in various social activities. In addition, various traditional events that are often held in Donggo also strengthen religious moderation. In many traditional events, such as traditional celebrations, traditional ceremonies, and cultural festivals, people from various religions join together, preparing the event and participating directly. Activities like this teach students to appreciate and understand the values of traditions that involve many parties, regardless of religious differences. Traditional events also often reflect a spirit of unity, prioritising harmony and respect for each other's culture and beliefs. Such a social life, where religion and culture go hand in hand, provides space for students to internalise the values of religious moderation more easily. Students learn in the classroom and gain direct understanding through their social experiences in society (Khamala & Andriyani, 2024).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This study, conducted at State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo, reveals that religious moderation in rural, religiously diverse schools is not merely a formal lesson within the Islamic Education curriculum, but a lived practice embodied by teachers and students through daily interactions, pedagogical strategies, and community engagement. The findings underscore the importance of integrating religious moderation more explicitly into the Islamic Education curriculum at the national level, supported by pedagogies that promote empathy, dialogue, and intercultural understanding. For policymakers, particularly within the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this calls for teacher training programs to strengthen educators' competencies in fostering tolerance in pluralistic classrooms. Academically, this research contributes a rare, context-specific, and phenomenologically grounded perspective from a rural setting, an area often

underrepresented in studies focusing on urban contexts and quantitative survey data. It enriches the scholarly discourse by linking curriculum, pedagogy, and community context in shaping religious moderation, using State Senior High School 2 Donggo and State Junior High School 2 Donggo as empirical case studies. However, the study is limited to these two rural schools, reducing generalizability, and relies on self-reported narratives that may involve social desirability bias. Future research should adopt multi-sited, mixed-methods, and longitudinal approaches to compare urban and rural educational settings, public and private, mono-religious and multi-religious, to better understand the sustainability and transferability of religious moderation practices.

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