

## The Implementation of Religious Moderation in the Merdeka Curriculum: A Case Study of Madrasahs in Binjai City

Arie Bastian Hadinata<sup>1</sup>, Surya Bakti Harahap<sup>2</sup>, Indira Fatra Deni<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Katon Bagaskara<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,4</sup>Institut Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Binjai, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, Indonesia

e-mail: [1ariebastianhadinata@insan.ac.id](mailto:1ariebastianhadinata@insan.ac.id), [2suryabakti@insan.ac.id](mailto:2suryabakti@insan.ac.id),

[3indirafatradeni@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:3indirafatradeni@uinsu.ac.id), [4muhammadkaton42@gmail.com](mailto:4muhammadkaton42@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the implementation of religious moderation values within the *Merdeka* Curriculum in madrasahs in Binjai City, identify supporting and inhibiting factors in their application, and evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used to integrate these values. This research employed a qualitative case study approach, using data collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. The research subjects consisted of madrasah principals, Islamic Religious Education teachers, and students at three madrasahs in Binjai City that have implemented the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The findings reveal that religious moderation values have been integrated into the curriculum and learning processes through various strategies, including contextual and collaborative approaches and the use of digital media. Supporting factors include teacher commitment and madrasah policies, while inhibiting factors involve limited time, teacher capacity, and inadequate evaluation tools. The effectiveness of teaching strategies needs further enhancement through teacher training, development of teaching materials, and comprehensive evaluation to ensure the internalization of religious moderation within madrasah culture. This study offers recommendations for policymakers to strengthen the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic education in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Madrasah education, *merdeka* curriculum, religious moderation, teacher capacity, teaching strategies



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Indira Fatra Deni, Muhammad Katon Bagaskara

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### A. Introduction

Religious moderation is a strategic issue in Indonesia's pluralistic and dynamic national education system. This concept, which emphasizes balance in understanding and practicing religious teachings, has become particularly relevant amid increasing polarization and the challenges of socio-religious diversity. The Indonesian government strongly encourages the mainstreaming of religious moderation through various policies, one of which is the *Merdeka* Curriculum, which places the strengthening of national character and diversity as the main pillars of education (Aflahah et al., 2023; Hidayati et

al., 2024). The regulation is in line with the Regulation of the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia Number 38 of 2021 concerning Religious Moderation, which emphasizes the internalization of the moderation values across all educational lines, including religious education.

Madrasahs, as Islamic educational institutions, play a strategic role in promoting moderate education. The role of madrasahs is not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to shape students' character and behavior so they can live harmoniously in a pluralistic society. Through the *Merdeka* Curriculum, madrasahs are encouraged to develop a contextual operational curriculum by integrating the value of religious moderation in learning, extracurricular activities, and school culture (Haris et al., 2024). However, in reality, these efforts are often constrained by teachers' limited understanding, less innovative learning approaches, and social environments that can be exclusive (Herman, 2020; Syahri et al., 2024).

In the local context, madrasahs in Binjai City, North Sumatra, represent a diversity of social conditions and religious cultures. This city is an essential locus for studying the implementation of religious moderation because it has a variety of institutional capacities, student backgrounds, and teachers' readiness to support the formation of moderate attitudes (Rafiq-uz-Zaman and Ashraf, 2025). However, there have been few studies that specifically examine the application of religious moderation values in madrasahs' curricula and learning practices in Binjai City, especially within the framework of the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Previous research has generally focused on the normative or conceptual aspects of religious moderation, with little attention to its classroom implementation or the local context of Islamic educational institutions (Alim and Munib, 2021; Annastawan, 2023). In addition, studies of moderation practices in madrasahs tend to be general and fail to account for the typical dynamics of each region. It creates a knowledge gap related to how religious moderation policies are actually operationalized in curriculum and learning at the grassroots level, including the challenges and supporting factors.

Based on these conditions, this study is here to fill the gap by examining the implementation of religious moderation values in the *Merdeka* Curriculum in madrasahs in Binjai City. In particular, this study analyzes the implementation of the value of religious moderation in learning, the obstacles that teachers face, and the effectiveness of the learning strategies used. This research is trying to make a theoretical contribution by enriching the study of religious moderation in Islamic education, as well as a practical contribution as a reference for policy-making to strengthen religious moderation in madrasahs at both the local and national levels.

The scope of this research is limited to the implementation of religious moderation values in Islamic Religious Education learning activities in madrasahs (*Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, and *Madrasah Aliyah*) in Binjai City. The research does not address the application of religious moderation values in public schools or non-formal institutions. The results of this research can contribute to the development of a

more contextual and moderate Islamic religious education curriculum. In addition, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for policymakers, at both the local and national levels, in designing teacher capacity-strengthening programs and providing learning resources that align with the spirit of moderation. Thus, madrasahs, as Islamic educational institutions, can play their strategic role in forming a young generation that is not only religiously obedient but also wise in responding to differences.

## **B. Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method, aiming to explore in depth the implementation of religious moderation values in the *Merdeka* Curriculum of madrasahs in Binjai City. The research site was purposively selected from several madrasahs that have implemented the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The research subjects consisted of madrasah heads, Islamic Religious Education teachers, and students directly involved in the learning process. This research was conducted in three state Islamic schools (madrasahs) in Binjai: *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* (MAN) Binjai, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri* (MTsN) Binjai, and *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Negeri* (MIN) Binjai. The subjects comprised three madrasah principals, six Islamic Education teachers, and nine students, selected purposively for their active involvement in implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews to gather teachers' strategies and understanding, participatory observations to observe classroom learning practices, and documentation of curriculum, syllabi, and teaching materials (Kusumastuti and Mustamil, 2019; Moleong, 2017). Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman (2014) model, involving the stages of data reduction, narrative presentation of data, and drawing conclusions based on patterns of findings observed in the field. To ensure data validity, the researchers applied the source triangulation technique and method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It involves comparing data from multiple informants and combining interview, observation, and documentation techniques to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

#### **The Integration of Religious Moderation Values within the *Merdeka* Curriculum at Madrasahs in Binjai City**

Based on the interviews, observations, and document analysis, the implementation of religious moderation values in madrasahs in Binjai can be classified into three main categories: (1) Integration into madrasah policies, (2) Integration into the learning process, and (3) Integration into school culture.

First, at the policy level, most madrasahs in Binjai have incorporated religious moderation values into their operational curriculum for the educational unit. Madrasah policy documents demonstrated a commitment to fostering a tolerant, just, and inclusive character, in accordance with the spirit of the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Some madrasahs even

included moderation values as an indicator of the success of Pancasila student profiles within the context of Islamic education.

Second, in the learning process, Islamic Religious Education teachers were at the forefront of instilling the value of moderation. They connected religious teachings to students' social contexts through discussion methods, case studies, and project-based learning. Students were invited to discuss current issues, including interfaith tolerance, digital radicalism, and the role of Islam in building social peace. Field observations indicated that students who were actively involved in reflective activities tended to have a better understanding of the meaning of moderation in everyday life.

Third, the integration of moderation was also evident in the school culture. Madrasahs with open leadership fostered a culture of healthy dialogue among teachers, students, and the community. Practices such as mutual respect for differences of opinion, the habit of praying across classes, and caring-based social activities were part of the character education routine.

The implementation of religious moderation values in the *Merdeka* Curriculum of madrasahs in Binjai exhibits complex dynamics, both in internal madrasah policies and in practical learning activities. The *Merdeka* Curriculum, which emphasizes freedom and flexibility for educational units in compiling teaching tools, has provided an excellent opportunity for madrasahs to internalize moderate religious values (Putri et al., 2024). In this context, religious moderation is not merely a middle position between extremism and liberalism, but also a worldview that reflects a tolerant, fair, and harmonious approach to living in a pluralistic society. Madrasahs in Binjai, as religious-based educational institutions, have excellent potential to be at the forefront of developing a cool and inclusive religious discourse (Herman, 2020).

In general, the study's results showed that most madrasahs in Binjai have attempted to instill the values of religious moderation through the subject of Islamic Education, as well as through non-formal activities such as moral habituation, religious literacy programs, and student involvement in religious-based school organizations. Among the most frequently emphasized values was tolerance for differences, both within and between religions. Islamic Education teachers in several madrasahs have attempted to incorporate reflective and contextual materials, such as discussions on the importance of *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, *wathaniyah*, and *basyariyah*, which are emphasized in the Ministry of Religion's policy on religious moderation (Asyhar, 2023; Syarifudin and Khatami, 2022; Tahir, 2024).

However, the success rate of implementing these values depended heavily on the extent to which the teacher understood the concept of moderation. In the interview, it was found that teachers' understandings of religious moderation were still diverse. Some teachers had a solid conceptual understanding and could effectively translate it into learning designs. In contrast, the others perceived moderation merely as a social value of tolerance, without connecting it to a solid theological or pedagogical foundation. This

condition underscores the urgent need to enhance teachers' capacity, particularly in literacy and religious moderation, in line with national Islamic education policies.

Additionally, lesson planning was a significant indicator of the implementation of religious moderation values. The results of analyzing documents, such as the syllabus and teaching modules, showed that not all learning tools explicitly included moderation values. In some madrasahs, the integration of religious moderation was more evident in the teacher's oral practice during teaching, but it was not systematically reflected in the designed teaching materials. It has implications for inconsistent learning between classes or between teachers. When moderation is not used as a measurable, structured learning indicator, learning tends to be sporadic and loses direction in the character education process (Ali and Firmansyah, 2023).

Furthermore, the implementation of learning that incorporated elements of moderation was often influenced by the pedagogical approach teachers use. In several observations, the researchers found that teachers who applied contextual approaches, discussions, and case studies tended to be more successful in instilling a moderate attitude in students. This phenomenon is vital to observe, given the challenges of the current digital era, which require students to think critically, distinguish between radical and moderate information, and foster awareness of living together in difference.

Extracurricular activities were also an effective means of internalizing the values of religious moderation. Some madrasahs offered programs such as religious *halaqahs*, cross-cultural studies, and student discussion forums that raised socio-religious themes. This type of activity has been proven to help students develop inclusive and open minds. However, not all madrasahs had such programs on an ongoing basis. Sometimes these activities appeared only at certain times, such as *Santri* Day or International Tolerance Day, and had yet to become part of the overall character development policy in madrasahs (Sumarto, 2021).

The school's cultural aspect also affected the implementation of moderation values. Schools with an open and egalitarian religious culture tended to embody moderation naturally. In a culture that valued mutual respect, interaction among teachers, students, and educational staff would serve as an informal medium for instilling moderation. On the other hand, madrasahs that were rigid in their approach to differences of opinion and lacked space for dialogue between parties risked strengthening exclusivism, which is contrary to the spirit of moderation itself.

Regarding regulations, the Ministry of Religion has directed madrasahs to integrate religious moderation into the operational curricula of educational units. However, in practice, not all madrasahs understood how to translate the policy into a learning framework. A gap still existed between normative policy and technical practice in the field. It was exacerbated by the lack of technical guidance or curriculum training that specifically emphasizes the integration of the value of religious moderation. Thus, these values were implemented according to each teacher's interpretation.

In the context of student participation, responses to learning that incorporated religious moderation values tended to be positive, especially when learning was linked to the social realities they encountered daily. Students showed an interest in themes such as tolerance between religions, the role of religion in democratic societies, and the importance of global peace. However, this interest requires pedagogical reinforcement so that it does not stop at passive knowledge but develops into moral awareness reflected in attitudes and behaviors (Ciażela and Bernat, 2017).

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Religious Moderation in Madrasahs in Binjai City**

The implementation of religious moderation values in madrasahs in Binjai was influenced by various interacting internal and external factors. These factors played a crucial role in determining the extent to which these values can be effectively integrated into the learning system, school culture, and madrasah policies. Internally, three main aspects supported the implementation of religious moderation in madrasahs: the leadership of the madrasah principal, teacher quality, and school culture.

First, the transformative leadership of the madrasah principal was a crucial factor. A madrasah principal with a moderate national vision actively directed, supervised, and set an example in implementing moderate values within the school environment. The madrasah principal served as an agent of change, initiating policies grounded in tolerance, justice, and inclusivity. This open leadership was reflected in a participatory management style, where every teacher and student was given space to contribute to fostering a culture of dialogue and respect for differences.

Second, the quality of teachers with high religious moderation literacy was also a determining factor in success. Teachers who had participated in religious moderation training from the Ministry of Religious Affairs or Islamic higher education institutions demonstrated superior pedagogical skills in designing contextual and dialogical learning. They could link religious values to social realities and instill in students an open and empathetic attitude toward diversity. Such teachers served not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as role models for students, emulating a balanced religious attitude.

Third, an inclusive and egalitarian school culture helped strengthen the internalization of religious moderation. A madrasah environment that fostered mutual respect and allowed for differing opinions created a learning atmosphere conducive to open dialogue. The horizontal relationship between teachers and students enabled healthy two-way communication, so that the values of moderation were not only taught theoretically but also lived out in daily social interactions. Thus, an inclusive school culture served as an effective social medium for strengthening students' moderate character.

Meanwhile, external factors also played a significant role in supporting the successful implementation of religious moderation. One such factor was community and parental support, which had been proven to foster a peaceful, diverse social environment. Collaboration among madrasahs and school committees, community leaders, and local

religious organizations resulted in cross-community religious activities that reinforced tolerance outside the classroom. This external support created continuity between madrasah education and community social practices.

Another external supporting factor was government policy, implemented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Regulations such as Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation No. 38 of 2021 concerning Religious Moderation and Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 56 of 2022 concerning the Implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum provided a strong legal basis for mainstreaming religious moderation in educational institutions (Zainuddin et al., 2025). These policies clarified the direction of national education, emphasizing a balance between knowledge, spirituality, and national character. In addition, support from partner educational institutions, such as Islamic universities and teacher forums, has broadened teachers' understanding of moderation practices in education and provided relevant training and learning materials.

However, the research also identified several inhibiting factors that hindered the optimal implementation of religious moderation. Internally, the main obstacle lay in limited training and mentoring for teachers. Many teachers lacked a practical understanding of how to integrate moderation values into lesson plans and evaluation instruments. As a result, moderate teaching often remained conceptual rather than being systematically implemented in the classroom. Furthermore, the limited availability of contextual teaching materials was a significant obstacle. Textbooks and learning modules available in madrasahs remained normative, thereby failing to stimulate students to think critically and reflectively about current socio-religious issues. Another challenge was the evaluation system, which did not yet encompass the dimensions of attitudes and behavior. Assessment of learning outcomes in madrasahs generally focused on cognitive aspects, whereas the success of moderation education should be measured by students' affective and moral changes in real life.

External inhibiting factors also significantly influenced the effectiveness of religious moderation implementation. One example was a conservative social environment, which viewed religious moderation as a compromise on the purity of spiritual teachings. This paradigm fostered resistance to inclusive education programs in madrasahs. Furthermore, the lack of support from local government agencies, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs or education offices, often led madrasahs to operate independently without clear technical guidance. Policy support at the central level had not yet been fully translated into sustainable development programs at the regional level.

Another significant obstacle was the influence of social media on students and teachers. The flow of unverified religious information on digital media often spread exclusive and intolerant narratives, indirectly undermining the spirit of moderation fostered in madrasahs. In this context, teachers needed digital literacy and critical thinking skills to help students sift through information and guide them toward a more rational, balanced understanding.

### **The Effectiveness of Learning Strategies Applied in Integrating Religious Moderation in the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Madrasahs in Binjai City**

The effectiveness of the learning strategies used to integrate religious moderation values into the *Merdeka* Curriculum in Binjai madrasahs was found to be central to achieving national education goals, particularly in fostering students who exhibited tolerance, inclusivity, and a strong sense of national identity. Based on research conducted across several madrasahs in Binjai, it is evident that teachers used varying strategic approaches when delivering materials on religious moderation. The diversity of this approach reflects adaptation to the conditions of each madrasah, including culture, student background, and the availability of educator resources. However, the effectiveness of the strategy was not measured solely by the existence of the method, but also by the extent to which the values of moderation were truly internalized in students' mindset and behavior.

One of the strategies widely used by teachers was the contextual teaching and learning approach, which emphasized the relationship between learning materials and the social realities students faced. This strategy was quite effective because it helped students not only understand the concept of moderation theoretically but also apply it in daily life, such as when socializing with friends from different religious and cultural backgrounds. In direct classroom observation, it was evident that teachers utilized case studies, group discussions, and simulations to illustrate the importance of tolerance, fairness, and non-extremism in responding to differences.

Another strategy that was considered adequate was the use of visual and digital media in learning. The use of educational videos, infographics, and interactive online content has strengthened students' understanding of the values of religious moderation. In some madrasahs, teachers creatively utilized digital platforms to introduce moderate Islamic figures, discuss contemporary religious issues, and showcase diverse practices in Indonesia. This kind of media not only attracted students' attention but also broadened their horizons to the reality of diversity they often did not encounter directly in their daily lives.

The collaborative approach was also widely used among teachers. Through group work, students discussed religious issues in an open and respectful atmosphere. This activity created a space for dialogue among students, enabling them to learn from and consider others' opinions without being easily judged. It was crucial in fostering a moderate attitude that upholds the values of deliberation, empathy, and tolerance for differences. In implementing this strategy, teachers served as facilitators, guiding discussions to remain within the scientific and educational frameworks.

Integrative strategies were also employed in the preparation of lesson plans and teaching modules, where the values of moderation were not only taught in the Islamic Education subject but also integrated into other lessons, such as Pancasila and Civics, Indonesian, and Social Studies. This approach aimed to instill these values thoroughly and consistently in various learning contexts. In some madrasahs, teachers even designed

projects to strengthen the profile of Pancasila students through religious moderation, such as tolerance campaigns, religious reflective journals, and documentation of peaceful living in family and school environments.

Although these strategies yielded positive results, their effectiveness was not optimal due to implementation obstacles. One of them was the lack of standard operating procedures (SOPs) related to integrating religious moderation into the learning process. As a result, the strategies still relied heavily on teachers' creativity and personal initiative. In madrasahs where teachers were active and innovative, the approach was practical. On the other hand, in madrasahs where teachers were poorly trained, the implementation of integration remained sporadic and unsystematic.

Limited time for learning was also another obstacle that impacted the effectiveness of the strategy. In the *Merdeka* Curriculum system, which prioritizes differentiated learning and projects, teachers often find it challenging to balance their time between delivering academic materials and instilling character values, including religious moderation. It shows the need to adjust the curriculum load so that moderation values are not just complementary, but also an integral part of the learning process.

From the students' perspective, the strategy's effectiveness was also influenced by their readiness to receive moderate values. Students from tolerant families or environments were more likely to accept the material. In contrast, students who lived in an exclusive or culturally homogeneous environment tended to require a more intensive and personalized approach to learning. Therefore, learning strategies need to be adjusted to students' psychosocial contexts to ensure the achievement of learning goals.

## Discussion

In general, the research results indicate that religious moderation in madrasahs in Binjai City has been integrated into three main domains: institutional policies, learning practices, and madrasa culture. However, the quality and consistency of implementation still vary across educational units, particularly in the availability of derivative policy tools and in teachers' capacity to internalize the values of religious moderation in the classroom.

Research findings show that the three madrasahs have responded to national regulations such as PMA No. 38 of 2021 and KMA No. 347 of 2022 by incorporating religious moderation into their vision and mission statements, madrasah work plans, and intracurricular curriculum programs and student profile strengthening projects. This confirms that religious moderation is not merely discourse but has become an institutional orientation.

These results align with Hilmin's (2024) study, which showed that the principles of the *Merdeka* Curriculum are highly compatible with the values of religious moderation, and that the flexible design of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum opens up space for the internalization of the values of *tawassuth*, *tasamuh*, and *musawah* in a more contextual manner in learning. Similarly, Azis (2024) emphasized that integrating

religious moderation into the development of the Islamic Education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum strengthens the Pancasila Student Profile by fostering tolerance, sensitivity to differences, and critical thinking. Thus, this research position aligns with the literature, which concludes that the *Merdeka* Curriculum can be a strategic vehicle for mainstreaming religious moderation in Islamic educational institutions.

The difference is that this study provides an empirical picture at the regional madrasah level, showing that translating national policies into madrasah documents is often normative and is not fully supported by operational instruments, success indicators, and precise evaluation mechanisms. This condition confirms previous findings that religious moderation policies still require various supporting instruments to be effective at the educational unit level (Husen, 2024).

In the learning domain, Islamic Religious Education teachers at the madrasahs have attempted to integrate the value of moderation by selecting materials, methods, and assessments that emphasize tolerance, patriotism, non-violence, and respect for diversity. Identified strategies include the use of socio-religious case studies, reflective dialogue and discussion, collaborative learning, and digital media to develop moderate religious literacy.

These findings align with the research of Taufiqurrohman et al. (2024), which showed that moderate values such as *tawassuth* (religious tolerance), *i'tidal* (religious tolerance), *tasamuh* (compassion), *syura* (compassion), *muwathanah* (compassion), and anti-violence can be systematically integrated into the objectives, materials, methods, and evaluation components of Islamic Religious Education learning at the secondary level. Azis's (2024) research also confirmed that project approaches, collaborative learning, and contextual problem-solving are practical in instilling a moderate attitude in the Islamic Religious Education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. However, this study found that strengthening religious moderation in the classroom still relies heavily on individual teacher initiative and competence. In some madrasahs, teachers' ability to read students' social contexts and manage sensitive issues (such as differences in schools of thought, local religious practices, or intolerance on social media) is not yet evenly distributed. This distinguishes the findings of this study from several literature-based studies that tend to portray the integration of moderation in the curriculum as relatively ideal and uniform. At the same time, field data shows a gap between curriculum design and daily implementation.

This research also shows that madrasah culture, from teacher-student interaction patterns and religious atmosphere to extracurricular activities and discipline, plays a crucial role as an ecosystem that supports (or hinders) religious moderation. Routine activities such as congregational prayer, Quran recitation, religious holiday commemorations, cross-community social service, and thematic dialogues on diversity serve as effective mediums for internalizing moderation values when managed with an inclusive vision.

This finding supports Zaenal's (2025) research, which emphasized that madrasahs play an important role in strengthening religious character and tolerance, not only through formal learning but also through role models, habits, and various social activities that foster an open attitude towards differences. The study of P2RA (Project for Strengthening *Rahmatan lil' Alamin* Student Profiles) also shows that integrating intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities involving teachers, parents, and the community is effective in fostering moderate character and developing students' social skills (Robihah et al., 2025).

Compared to research that focuses on one level of education or one set of programs (for example, only P2RA or only the *Merdeka* Curriculum of Islamic Education), this research contributes by mapping the practice of religious moderation more comprehensively at three levels of madrasah (MI, MTs, MA) simultaneously, so that continuity and discontinuity between levels in the formation of moderate student profiles are visible.

Internally, the leadership of madrasah principals, teachers' professional and spiritual capacities, and teamwork have proven key factors in the successful implementation of religious moderation. Madrasah principals with a clear vision of religious moderation tend to promote inclusive policies, provide space for teacher innovation, and make moderation a marker of madrasah performance. This is consistent with research findings on the roles of teachers, madrasah principals, and supervisors, which emphasize the importance of collaboration among educational actors in fostering inclusive and tolerant religious practices (Salim et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the identified inhibiting factors include: (1) limited training and technical assistance for teachers related to the *Merdeka* Curriculum based on religious moderation; (2) the unavailability of assessment tools that specifically measure moderation achievements; (3) limited infrastructure supporting collaborative activities and cross-group dialogue; and (4) the influence of the external environment (family, social media, community) which sometimes brings exclusive religious narratives into the classroom.

This finding intersects with a study of the readiness of religious moderation programs in schools/madrasahs, which found that institutional readiness, moderation literacy among civil servants and educators, and support for implementation instruments are important prerequisites so that religious moderation policies do not stop at the slogan level (Harmi, 2022). This research adds a contextual dimension: in Binjai City madrasahs, the main challenge is not the rejection of the concept of moderation, but rather the technical ability to translate it into a structured, systematic, and measurable program.

When compared with literature research on the internalization of religious moderation in the Islamic Education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, this study has a common ground in the conclusion that religious moderation can be organically integrated into the objectives, content, and learning process, and contributes significantly to the formation of tolerant student character (Hilmin, 2024). Similarly, similarities with studies on the

role of madrasahs in religious moderation are evident in the recognition that madrasahs are strategic institutions for developing character and religious tolerance, provided that the institutional culture and leadership support inclusive values (Zaenal, 2025). The difference lies in the focus of this research which: (1) presents multi-level empirical data (MI–MTs–MA) in one administrative area, thus showing variations in strategies and achievements of religious moderation between levels, (2) shows that the implementation of religious moderation based on the *Merdeka* Curriculum is not yet fully aligned between policy documents, learning practices, and madrasa culture, (3) emphasizes the importance of training support and professional development of teachers as a differentiating factor between successful madrasahs and those still struggling in integrating religious moderation. From a methodological perspective, a qualitative approach grounded in observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis enables researchers to capture the dynamics of religious moderation in context and holistically. Triangulation of sources and techniques increases the credibility of the findings. However, it also limits generalization because the data are closely tied to the characteristics of three madrasahs in Binjai.

The pluralistic social context of Binjai, with its diverse socio-economic backgrounds and religious understandings, also influences the implementation of religious moderation in madrasahs. On the one hand, this context encourages madrasahs to be more serious about building a culture of tolerance and dialogue; on the other hand, the flow of digital information and exposure to diverse religious narratives (including those that tend to be exclusive) require teachers to have stronger digital literacy and religious literacy competencies. These findings confirm that religious moderation is not only a matter of curriculum design but also a matter of madrasahs' ability to negotiate constantly changing social realities (Wiratama, 2025).

Thus, this study confirms that religious moderation in madrasahs is not merely a normative policy agenda, but a pedagogical and cultural process that demands the commitment, capacity, and collaboration of all stakeholders. The study's primary contribution lies in comprehensively mapping how religious moderation is operationalized in madrasahs in Binjai, as well as identifying key factors that need to be strengthened to ensure that madrasahs truly become spaces for the growth of a generation of moderate, tolerant, and contributing Muslims to the life of the nation and State.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the implementation of religious moderation within the *Merdeka* Curriculum at madrasahs in Binjai City has been successful, albeit not yet fully optimal. Moderation values have been integrated into policies, learning processes, and school culture. Internal factors, such as principal leadership and teacher competence, are key strengths, while external factors, such as community support and government policies, contribute to strengthening implementation.

However, obstacles remain, including limited teacher training, contextual teaching materials, and the influence of a conservative social environment. Regularly

implementing religious moderation activities has been shown to have a positive impact on student character, improving critical thinking skills, and fostering tolerance. Therefore, to strengthen these results, a sustainable strategy is needed through teacher training in moderation, the development of moderate attitude evaluation instruments, and madrasah policies that emphasize moderation as the core of Islamic character education.

Practical implications include several points. For madrasahs, internal policies are needed that emphasize integrating moderate values as the core of Islamic character education. Madrasahs need to develop SOPs for moderation-based learning and periodically evaluate their implementation, while collaboration between teachers can be enhanced through joint working forums that discuss contextual and moderate learning practices. For Islamic Education teachers and educators, teachers should be encouraged to participate in regular training on religious moderation and the development of critical pedagogy, and to develop context-based teaching modules, including case studies on tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and social media analysis, to strengthen the learning process. For the government and policymakers, integrated and systematic training programs are needed for madrasah teachers on implementing religious moderation, and the provision of thematic textbooks on religious moderation based on the Merdeka Curriculum along with guidelines for evaluating moderate character can provide concrete government support. For the community and religious leaders, synergy between madrasahs and community leaders is needed to create a social ecosystem that supports moderation activities, such as interfaith dialogue, community service, and moderate parenting, thereby fostering moderation among students.

Research limitations and recommendations are also identified. Regarding limitations of location and variables, the study was conducted in only five madrasahs in Binjai City, so it does not fully reflect the context of madrasahs in other areas with different social characteristics; therefore, future research can be expanded to more heterogeneous areas to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Concerning limitations of evaluation instruments, this study did not include a quantitative instrument to measure changes in students' attitudes toward religious moderation, and future studies are recommended to use character measurement instruments or evaluation models based on a moderation attitude rubric to produce more systematic and accurate data. Related to limitations of observation time, observations were conducted over a limited period, which restricts the ability to capture the long-term development of moderation implementation in the madrasah environment; thus, longitudinal research is needed to assess the sustainability of moderate character formation in students.

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Katon Bagaskara

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