

The Role of the Headteacher in Promoting Religious Moderation in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to analyse the strategic role of headteachers' leadership in promoting religious moderation at primary school level, as well as to explore strategies for internalising this concept and the factors influencing them. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with headteachers and teachers, participatory observation of school activities, and documentation. Data analysis was carried out through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions based on Miles, Huberman's and Saldana interactive model. The research findings indicate that headteachers fulfil a multidimensional role as vision articulators, cultural architects and instructional leaders. The internalisation of the value of moderation is carried out systematically through pedagogical integration in learning, the fostering of inclusive interactions, and the strengthening of symbolic capital through leading by example. The key enabling factors were found to be the collective commitment of the school community and a supportive organisational climate. However, this process faces external challenges in the form of family backgrounds and external environmental influences that are sometimes at odds with the school's values. This study underscores the importance of synergy between structural and cultural approaches in educational leadership to ensure the sustainability of efforts to promote religious moderation in primary schools.

Keyword: School Leadership, Promoting Religious Moderation

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran strategis kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam penguatan moderasi beragama di tingkat pendidikan dasar, serta mengeksplorasi strategi internalisasi dan faktor-faktor yang memengaruhinya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah dan guru, observasi partisipatif terhadap aktivitas sekolah, serta dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahap kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan berdasarkan model interaktif Miles, Huberman dan Saldana. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepala sekolah menjalankan peran multidimensional sebagai artikulatur visi, arsitek budaya, dan pemimpin instruksional. Internalisasi nilai moderasi dilakukan secara sistemik melalui integrasi pedagogis dalam pembelajaran, pembiasaan interaksi inklusif, serta penguatan modal simbolik melalui keteladanan. Faktor pendukung utama ditemukan pada komitmen kolektif warga sekolah dan iklim organisasi yang kondusif. Namun, proses ini menghadapi tantangan eksternal berupa latar belakang keluarga dan pengaruh lingkungan luar yang terkadang kontradiktif dengan nilai-nilai sekolah. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya sinergi antara jalur struktural dan kultural dalam kepemimpinan pendidikan untuk memastikan keberlanjutan penguatan moderasi beragama di sekolah dasar.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah, Penguatan Moderasi Beragama*

Introduction

Promoting religious moderation in educational settings is a strategic issue in the context of Indonesia's diverse society. Religious moderation is not only understood as a middle-of-the-road approach (*wasathiyah*), but also encompasses the values of tolerance and inclusivity, as well as the ability to respect differences in belief within social life (Hasan, Mujahidin, dkk., 2024; Hasan, Solechan, dkk., 2024). From an educational perspective, primary school is the initial phase in the development of pupils' character; consequently, the religious values instilled at this stage will have a long-term impact on their mindset and behaviour. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia emphasises that religious moderation is a vital foundation for maintaining social harmony within a multicultural society (Hutabarat, 2023). Therefore, the role of the headteacher as an educational leader is crucial in guiding educational policies and practices that foster the development of moderate attitudes from an early age.

On the other hand, the reality on the ground shows that the challenges involved in promoting religious moderation remain quite complex. Various incidents of intolerance involving pupils and the school environment frequently occur, ranging from religious discrimination and bullying of minority groups to the rejection of different religious practices (Sapouna dkk., 2023). This phenomenon indicates that the values of moderation have not yet been fully internalised within school culture. Acts of intolerance in educational settings remain a recurring issue, particularly with regard to freedom of religion and belief (Nurhakim dkk., 2024). This situation indicates a gap between policy and implementation at the school level.

Furthermore, the leadership role of headteachers in this context has not yet been fully realised. Many headteachers still focus on administrative and academic aspects, whilst the promotion of values of religious moderation has not yet become a top priority in school management (Adisaputro & Solechan, 2025). In fact, according to Mulyasa, the headteacher plays a strategic role as a leader, manager and innovator in fostering a conducive school culture (Mulyasa, 2022). When leadership is not focused on reinforcing the values of tolerance and diversity, schools risk becoming environments where exclusionary and intolerant attitudes are perpetuated. Therefore, leadership strategies are needed that can integrate the values of religious moderation into all educational activities, whether through the curriculum, practical activities or the school culture.

A number of studies on headteachers' leadership in promoting religious moderation have been conducted, but they still reveal limitations in certain areas. Research by (Fitriana dkk., 2025) focuses on the role of headteachers in the planning and implementation of religious moderation

programmes through the vision, mission, curriculum and religious activities at secondary level. Meanwhile, research (Nadya dkk., 2025) is more conceptual in nature, examining headteachers' leadership strategies in establishing schools as forums for religious moderation without the support of empirical field data. In contrast to these two studies, this research takes a more comprehensive approach by integrating aspects of leadership roles, implementation strategies, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the promotion of religious moderation. Furthermore, this study focuses on primary schools, a level that has received relatively limited attention, and reveals the practice of participatory leadership and the normalisation of interfaith religious activities as concrete forms of the internalisation of the values of moderation. Consequently, this study offers a more contextual and practical perspective on understanding the practice of strengthening religious moderation through headteachers' leadership at the primary education level.

In light of this disparity, this study was conducted at SDN 2 Grogol Diwek in Jombang, a school characterised by the diverse backgrounds of its pupils, both in terms of religious understanding and family circumstances. In daily practice, interactions among pupils reveal a dynamic process of understanding differences, reflected in the continued tendency towards social grouping and differing attitudes towards specific religious practices. On the other hand, the school has initiated various religious and social activities aimed at strengthening the value of tolerance, such as joint activities involving all pupils regardless of their background. This situation indicates institutional efforts to foster a culture of religious moderation, although its implementation still requires strengthening, particularly in terms of leadership and the management of school culture.

Based on the above, this study aims to analyse headteachers' leadership in promoting religious moderation in primary schools, identify the strategies employed, and examine the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence their implementation. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic educational management studies, particularly regarding leadership based on the values of religious moderation. In practical terms, the results of this study can serve as a reference for headteachers and education policymakers in designing effective strategies to foster a tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious school culture amidst diversity.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of headteachers' leadership practices in promoting religious moderation within primary school settings. The qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for a contextual and holistic examination of the phenomenon within its natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), whereas the case study design is used to explore a case intensively and in depth within the confines

of a specific system (Yin, 2017). This study seeks to capture the full dynamics of leadership practices in a real-world school context.

The research subjects were selected purposively, taking into account their direct involvement in promoting religious moderation. The main informants included school principals, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders. Data collection techniques comprised observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Interviews were used to explore the informants' experiences and perspectives, observation to observe practices first-hand, whilst documentation served as supporting data. These techniques are standard procedures in qualitative research for obtaining rich and in-depth data (Moleong, 1989).

Data analysis is carried out interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions, as outlined by (Miles dkk., 2014). This process continues until credible findings are obtained. To ensure the validity of the data, this study employs source and method triangulation, thereby ensuring that the consistency and validity of the data can be verified (Sugiyono, 2011). Through this approach, the research findings are expected to provide an accurate and scientifically sound picture.

Research Findings and Discussion

Research Findings

The Role of School Heads in Promoting Religious Moderation

The headteacher's leadership in promoting religious moderation is evident in the direction of policies that focus not only on academic aspects but also on fostering a spirit of tolerance among pupils. This was emphasised by the headteacher. "From the very beginning, we have directed the school's programmes to focus not only on academics but also on fostering a spirit of mutual respect."

This policy was then put into practice by fostering an inclusive school culture in day-to-day interactions. The practice of not discriminating against pupils became a cultural strategy that was developed. "All pupils are involved in joint activities regardless of their background, so that a spirit of mutual respect can be fostered."



Figure 1. Fostering a Sense of Community Among Pupils in School Activities

In addition, the headteacher has also demonstrated an innovative approach by integrating the value of moderation into religious activities, ensuring they are not merely ritualistic but also instil a sense of community. This effort is reinforced through coordination with teachers to ensure that the value of tolerance is embedded in the learning process, as explained by one of the teachers: “The headteacher always reminds us to instil the value of tolerance in our teaching.”

In practice, the headteacher’s example plays a key role in shaping pupils’ attitudes, which are then reinforced through ongoing assessment of pupils’ social development. Nevertheless, from the pupils’ perspective, the internalisation of the value of moderation is still a gradual process.

The findings indicate that headteachers’ leadership plays a role not only at a conceptual level, but is also effectively implemented through policies, school culture, programme innovation and exemplary behaviour, all of which contribute to strengthening religious moderation within the primary education sector.

Principals’ Strategies for Instilling the Values of Religious Moderation

The headteacher’s strategy for instilling the values of religious moderation is implemented through various school activities. One such method is through classroom teaching, where teachers are guided not only to deliver the curriculum but also to instil values of tolerance, as the headteacher stated. “We guide our teachers not only to deliver the curriculum but also to foster an attitude of mutual respect in every lesson.” This demonstrates that the internalisation of the values of religious moderation is carried out directly through the pedagogical process.

Furthermore, the strategy is implemented through habit-forming activities involving all pupils, regardless of their background. This approach aims to foster a spirit of mutual respect in everyday interactions. “We encourage pupils to take part in joint activities so that they become accustomed to respecting one another.” This statement suggests that habit-forming is an effective means of fostering a moderate character.



Figure 2. Fostering a Culture of Mutual Respect through Joint Activities

The promotion of moderation is also achieved through inclusive religious activities, which are not merely ritual-oriented but also instil a sense of community. Furthermore, the example set by teachers is a key factor in this process. One teacher stated, “We strive to set an example for our pupils by being fair and non-discriminatory.” This underscores that the internalisation of values is achieved through concrete practices that pupils can emulate.

Furthermore, this strategy is reinforced through the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of pupils’ behaviour. The headteacher stated, “We continue to monitor and remind pupils if any of them still fail to respect differences.” This statement indicates that the internalisation of the value of religious moderation is carried out consistently and adaptively.

The strategies implemented by the headteacher include integration into the curriculum, habit formation, religious activities, leading by example, and ongoing assessment. This demonstrates that the internalisation of the value of religious moderation is carried out comprehensively through a systematic and contextual approach within the school environment.

Factors that Support and Hinder the Promotion of Religious Moderation

The promotion of religious moderation is influenced by interrelated enabling and hindering factors. On the supportive side, the commitment of the headteacher and teachers is key to instilling the value of tolerance. This is evident from a shared understanding in guiding pupils, as expressed: “All teachers here have been reminded to always instil an attitude of mutual respect in pupils.” This statement indicates collective support in building a culture of religious moderation.

In addition, a supportive school environment and routine activities help to reinforce the process of internalising values. The headteacher stated: “We create a comfortable school atmosphere so that pupils can respect one another.” This indicates that an inclusive school climate is a significant contributing factor.

On the other hand, there are inhibiting factors stemming from the students’ backgrounds and external influences. Differences in understanding and family customs sometimes affect students’ interactions. As stated: “There are still some students who tend to choose friends based on external influences.” This statement indicates the presence of external influences that the school is not yet fully able to control.

Furthermore, the process of internalising the value of moderation is still taking place gradually. One pupil remarked: “Sometimes there are still friends who do not respect differences, but the teacher always reminds us.” This underscores the fact that fostering religious moderation requires consistency and continuity.

The success of efforts to promote religious moderation is underpinned by the commitment of the school community and a supportive environment, whilst the obstacles lie in external factors and the uneven level of understanding among pupils.

Discussion

The Role of School Heads in Promoting Religious Moderation

The headteacher's leadership in strengthening religious moderation within this institution is not merely a routine administrative role, but rather an embodiment of visionary strategic management. This begins with the strategy formulation stage, during which the headteacher repositions the institution's vision by shifting its focus from one previously dominated by conventional academic achievements towards the strengthening of an inclusive socio-religious character. The headteacher's statement affirming that the school's programmes are deliberately designed to foster mutual respect demonstrates a deep understanding that the challenges of education today lie not only in cognitive aspects, but also in the resilience of values of tolerance at the grassroots level. In line with the view (Mustari dkk., 2025), The effectiveness of educational organisations depends heavily on the ability of their leaders to align an idealistic vision with practical operational policies, so that religious moderation becomes a distinguishing feature of the institution.

This vision was subsequently put into practice through the reshaping of the school culture, with a focus on creating inclusive spaces for interaction. The cultural strategy developed by the headteacher emphasised the practice of involving all pupils in collective activities regardless of their social or religious background. This process demonstrates that the headteacher acts as a cultural architect who understands that the internalisation of values of moderation cannot be achieved solely through formal classroom instruction, but must be fostered through real-life social experiences. As emphasised by (Purwanto, 2025; Solechan, 2024), Fostering a moderate character through organisational culture is far more effective, as these values are internalised through daily interactions that shape a new habitus for the students. Consequently, religious moderation in this school is transformed from a mere theoretical concept into an automatic behaviour that underpins every interaction among the school community.

The sustainability of this inclusive culture is further reinforced by the role of the headteacher as an instructional leader capable of influencing teachers' pedagogical behaviour. The headteacher actively ensures that the values of religious moderation become a hidden curriculum that permeates every subject and religious activity. This integration ensures that religious activities at school are no longer merely ritualistic and formal, but are more substantial in instilling humanistic values and respect for diversity. Research (Shawmi dkk., 2025) confirms that the synergy between leadership guidance and teachers' creativity in the classroom is key to fostering religious moderation within the school. Through close coordination, the headteacher ensures that all teaching staff are on the same page when it comes to incorporating the values of moderation into the learning process.

The effectiveness of all these strategies hinges on the power of the headteacher's exemplary conduct as the organisation's symbolic capital. This exemplary conduct provides strong moral legitimacy, whereby the headteacher acts not only as a decision-maker but also as a role model who consistently demonstrates a moderate attitude in every concrete action. Although the internalisation of values among pupils at primary level often takes place in an evolutionary and gradual manner, the presence of a leader capable of aligning words with deeds serves as the primary catalyst for changes in pupils' character. This reinforces the view (Bass & Riggio, 2006) that the most transformative educational leadership is that which is capable of inspiring through concrete action, so that the promotion of religious moderation in primary education can be carried out in an authentic and sustainable manner.

Principals' Strategies for Instilling the Values of Religious Moderation

The internalisation of the values of religious moderation is achieved through a comprehensive strategy, beginning with the integration of these values at the pedagogical level within the classroom. This strategy positions teachers not merely as conveyors of subject matter (transfer of knowledge), but as agents who instil values (transfer of value). The headteacher's instruction for teachers to incorporate an attitude of mutual respect into every subject demonstrates that internalisation is carried out through an integrative approach. Theoretically, this strategy aligns with the concept of a character-based curriculum, which emphasises that values cannot be taught in isolation but must be embedded throughout the entire instructional process (Muslimin, 2023). Research (Wafa dkk., 2025) reinforces this finding by stating that the direct internalisation of values during the learning process is more effective because students recognise the relevance of those values within an academic context.

Following the instructional pathway, internalisation strategies are extended through habituation mechanisms in pupils' daily interactions. This approach aims to transform the values of moderation from mere cognitive knowledge into automatic behaviour. By involving all pupils in shared activities regardless of their background, the school is building an inclusive social ecosystem. This habituation strategy is a concrete manifestation of the application of social learning theory, whereby a consistently conditioned environment will gradually shape an individual's character. As explained by (Amalia & Subiyantoro, 2025), The sustainability of a value within an organisation depends heavily on the establishment of routines that support that value. Through documented joint activities, pupils not only learn about tolerance, but they also practise tolerance as part of the school culture.

The effectiveness of this internalisation strategy is further reinforced by the factors of modelling and the reorientation of religious activities towards inclusivity. School heads and teachers position themselves as central figures who set a concrete example of fairness and non-

discrimination. This modelling strategy is a determining factor because pupils at primary level tend to internalise values through observing the behaviour of the adults around them. This is consistent with the findings (Asrowi, 2025) that teachers' exemplary conduct is the most effective tool for promoting religious moderation in schools, as it lends practical legitimacy to the theories taught in the classroom. The integration of values of togetherness into religious rituals also demonstrates that schools have succeeded in transforming routine activities into meaningful learning experiences.

This internalisation strategy is complemented by an adaptive mechanism for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The headteacher does not merely implement the strategy at the outset, but conducts intensive monitoring of pupils' behavioural development to ensure that no traces of intolerance remain. This evaluation strategy serves as a quality control mechanism for the character-building process. Theoretically, successful value internalisation management requires a consistent evaluation cycle to adapt the approach to the social dynamics of the students (Aluf dkk., 2024). Consequently, the strategy implemented by the school constitutes a systematic, integrated system ranging from pedagogical planning and cultural indoctrination to moral exemplarity and adaptive supervision which collectively contributes to the strengthening of contextual religious moderation.

Factors that Support and Hinder the Promotion of Religious Moderation

The success of promoting religious moderation within the school environment is largely determined by the synergy between leadership commitment and collective support from educators. Research findings indicate that shared perceptions between headteachers and teachers constitute the most fundamental internal supporting factor. A shared understanding of the urgency of tolerance creates a solid managerial foundation, enabling policies outlined by leadership to be consistently implemented by teachers in the classroom. Theoretically, this collective support constitutes a form of organisational social capital that accelerates the diffusion of new values. This aligns with the view (Sahudi, 2025) that the effectiveness of change within educational institutions depends heavily on the readiness of staff to adopt and put the leader's vision into practice in unison.

In addition to human resources, the creation of a conducive and inclusive organisational climate also acts as a catalyst in the process of internalising values. A school environment designed to provide psychological comfort for pupils from diverse backgrounds allows cross-group interaction to occur naturally. The headteacher's strategy in fostering a comfortable atmosphere is not merely a matter of physical facilities, but an effort to create a 'safe space' for the development of mutual respect. According to (Lessy dkk., 2022), A supportive environment is a key factor in determining whether a strategy can take root and become part of the organisational culture. In an inclusive climate, the practices adopted by the school are no longer perceived as normative impositions, but rather as a social necessity for the entire school community.

However, despite strong internal support, the process of promoting religious moderation continues to face challenges stemming from external factors, particularly family background and influences from outside the school environment. Field findings indicate that differences in religious understanding at home sometimes give rise to residual exclusivism among pupils when they interact at school. The (Mahrus & Afandi, 2024), Schools often have to contend with conflicting values within the wider community, which makes their role all the more challenging as they must ‘deconstruct’ pupils’ intolerant views before rebuilding a sense of moderation.

This challenge is compounded by the reality that the internalisation of values is an evolutionary process requiring a high degree of consistency. Obstacles such as student behaviour that does not yet fully respect differences indicate that the cultivation of moderate character cannot be achieved instantly, but rather through a gradual, adaptive process. The uneven level of understanding among students requires schools to continue with ongoing evaluation and support. This underscores that, in the management of educational change, resistance or external obstacles must be addressed through persistent and flexible leadership (Susanti dkk., 2025). Synergy between a strong internal commitment to mitigating negative external influences is key to ensuring that religious moderation is permanently and thoroughly internalised by every student.

Conclusion

Strengthening religious moderation in primary education relies heavily on the multifaceted role of the headteacher. The headteacher’s leadership functions not only as a managerial authority but also as a cultural architect capable of translating the vision of moderation into concrete strategic policies. By repositioning the vision to prioritise values of inclusivity over mere academic achievement, the headteacher has succeeded in creating a strong operational foundation for the internalisation of values of tolerance within the school.

The internalisation strategy is implemented systematically through four main channels: pedagogical (integration into learning), cultural (fostering inclusive interactions), symbolic (teachers and headteachers setting a good example), and managerial (ongoing behavioural evaluation). The success of this strategy is driven by supporting factors such as the collective commitment of the school community and a conducive organisational climate. However, the effectiveness of this programme still faces significant external barriers, particularly the influence of students’ family backgrounds and social environments, which are sometimes at odds with the values of moderation taught at school.

The implications of this study confirm that fostering religious moderation is not a one-off initiative, but rather an evolutionary process that requires consistent role modelling and the ongoing shaping of the social environment. As a recommendation, schools need to strengthen their collaboration with parents through parenting programmes based on moderation to minimise the

gap in values between the school and home environments. Furthermore, future research is advised to explore the effectiveness of using digital media in supporting the strengthening of religious moderation at primary education level to address the challenges posed by increasingly complex external influences.

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