

Multicultural Problem-Based Learning: Strategies for Improving Religious Moderation in Elementary Schools

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Abstract: This study examines teachers' perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of Multicultural Problem-Based Learning (MPBL) in strengthening religious moderation attitudes among Elementary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students in Kuningan Regency, Indonesia. A quantitative survey approach was employed using a questionnaire developed from key dimensions of religious moderation, namely national commitment, religious tolerance, appreciation of religion-based local culture, and religion-based anti-violence, as well as indicators of the importance of MPBL in primary education. The results indicate that teachers overwhelmingly perceive MPBL as a highly relevant and effective learning approach. MPBL is considered capable of strengthening students' character in appreciating diversity, reducing negative stereotypes and prejudice, and fostering critical, collaborative, and solution-oriented thinking skills. Teachers also agree that this approach supports the internalization of tolerance, respect for different religious beliefs, and appreciation of local cultural wisdom rooted in religious values. However, the findings reveal that students' deeper understanding of the universal principle that all religions teach peace has not been fully internalized, indicating a gap between cognitive understanding and affective-behavioral development.

Keywords: multicultural problem-based learning; religious moderation; multicultural approach; basic education

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally, religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse countries in the world. While this pluralism constitutes a fundamental national asset, it simultaneously presents persistent challenges in maintaining social cohesion, particularly within educational settings where early character formation occurs (Tilaar, 2012; Banks, 2015). In recent years, several national surveys and reports have indicated emerging vulnerabilities related to intolerance and exclusivist attitudes among young generations, highlighting the urgency of strengthening inclusive values through formal education (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

In response to these challenges, religious moderation has been positioned by the Indonesian government as a national strategic agenda in character education. Religious moderation emphasizes balance between commitment to religious teachings and respect for diversity, non-violence, national unity, and appreciation of local traditions (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). Importantly, religious moderation is not merely a theological concept but a social competence that must be cultivated through sustained educational experiences, particularly at the elementary level when foundational attitudes and social behaviors are formed (Naim, 2020).

However, empirical studies and educational evaluations suggest that students' understanding of religious moderation at the Elementary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah levels remains largely cognitive and declarative. While students may demonstrate surface-level knowledge—such as acknowledging the importance of mutual respect—this understanding is often not deeply internalized into affective dispositions and observable behaviors (Sapriya, 2017; Naim, 2020). This gap between normative knowledge and lived social practice represents a critical educational problem that requires targeted pedagogical intervention.

One contributing factor to this gap is the dominance of text-based and teacher-centered instructional practices in subjects related to religion and citizenship education. These approaches tend to emphasize moral instruction and conceptual transmission, with limited opportunities for students to engage in authentic social problem-solving related to diversity (Rusman, 2017; Gay, 2018). Consequently, students rarely experience learning situations that require them to confront real-world issues of difference, negotiate meaning with peers, or reflect critically on social interactions across religious boundaries.

Despite the acknowledged importance of religious moderation, there is a notable absence of empirically examined instructional models that are explicitly designed to facilitate the internalization of moderation values at the elementary level. Existing studies on problem-based learning (PBL) have consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing critical thinking, collaboration, and contextual understanding (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Arends, 2012). Separately, research on multicultural education indicates its potential to reduce prejudice and foster empathy when implemented dialogically (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018). Nevertheless, quantitative evidence examining the integration of multicultural principles within problem-based learning as a structured instructional model for religious moderation in Indonesian elementary education remains limited.

From a theoretical standpoint, the integration of multicultural education and PBL is strongly supported by social constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge and values are constructed through social interaction, dialogue, and contextual experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Schunk, 2012). Through heterogeneous group

discussions and authentic problem scenarios related to religious and cultural diversity, students are afforded opportunities to test assumptions, develop empathy, and negotiate shared meanings—processes essential for affective and behavioral internalization of moderation values.

Preliminary observations and needs assessments conducted in elementary schools and madrasah ibtidaiyah in Kuningan Regency further indicate that teachers recognize the importance of instilling tolerance and religious moderation but express the need for concrete, activity-based learning models that actively engage students (Fieldnote Researcher, 2025). Teachers also emphasize the relevance of addressing diversity issues across subjects through integrative and problem-oriented approaches.

Based on these conditions, this study does not claim to measure behavioral effectiveness in causal terms, but rather seeks to examine teachers' perceptions regarding the relevance and perceived contribution of multicultural problem-based learning to strengthening dimensions of religious moderation. By employing a perception-based quantitative survey, this study aims to provide empirical insights into how educators evaluate the potential of this instructional approach, identify dimensions of moderation most supported, and determine further needs related to teacher training and instructional material development.

Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the refinement of instructional frameworks for religious moderation by offering empirically grounded evidence on teachers' perspectives, while also providing a foundation for future experimental and longitudinal studies on behavioral internalization of moderation values in Indonesia's pluralistic educational context.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative survey approach to examine teachers' perceptions of the relevance and perceived contribution of multicultural problem-based learning in strengthening religious moderation at the elementary education level (Creswell, 2017). The research subjects were elementary school and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah teachers, as they are directly involved in the planning and implementation of learning related to character and religious education.

The research data was obtained online using Google Forms, with a sample size of 100 teachers from public elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in Kuningan Regency, West Java, Indonesia. This region was chosen because of its socio-cultural and religious diversity, making it a relevant context for studying religious moderation in primary education. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had sufficient teaching experience and were involved in subjects related to religion, citizenship, or thematic learning.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to teachers. This instrument was developed based on the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' framework for religious moderation (2019), covering four dimensions: national commitment, religious tolerance, appreciation of local religion-based culture, and anti-religion-based violence, as well as indicators of multicultural problem-based learning. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale.

The instrument was reviewed by experts to ensure content validity, and its reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify dominant trends in teachers' perceptions. This approach was chosen to provide an empirical description of perceived contributions rather than causal effectiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In achieving the expected goals, researchers formulated several indicators in making questionnaires including: (1) the importance of multicultural problem-based learning in Elementary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, (2) Religious Moderation: National Commitment, (3) Religious Moderation: Religious Tolerance, (4) Religious Moderation: Respect for Religion-Based Local Culture, (5) Religious Moderation: Religion- Based Anti-Violence. The indicators to be measured are derived into various statements, both positive statements and negative statements. The results of this questionnaire will be analyzed to identify common patterns, challenges, and opportunities faced by teachers in integrating religious moderation values into the learning process. Below are the results of the questionnaire distributed to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers in Kuningan Regency.

Multicultural Problem-Based Learning in elementary school and madrasah ibtidaiyah

Data from the distribution of questionnaires to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers to see the importance of multicultural problem-based learning in elementary school and madrasah ibtidaiyah can be seen in the questionnaire results below:

Table.1. Questionnaire Results of Multicultural Problem Based Learning in elementary school and madrasah ibtidaiyah

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	A multicultural problem-based approach can strengthen students' character in appreciating differences.	50.5 %	49.5 %	0.0%	0.0 %
2	The application of multicultural problem-based learning is not directed at increasing students' tolerance towards differences.	7.9%	29.7 %	53.5 %	8.9 %
3	Multicultural problem-based learning helps reduce negative stereotypes and prejudices in the school environment.	21.8 %	75.2 %	3.0%	0.0 %
4	Problem-based learning helps students develop critical and analytical thinking skills.	47.5 %	52.5 %	0.0%	0.0 %
5	Without the application of problem-based learning model, students tend to be passive and less involved in finding solutions to real problems.	16.8 %	72.3 %	9.9%	1.0 %
6	Problem-based learning is a relevant method for shaping students' creative and solutive character	29.7 %	68.3 %	2.0%	0.0 %

Column headers:

SS: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

The results showed that the implementation of problem-based learning model with multicultural approach at elementary school and madrasah ibtidaiyah level received a very positive response from the teachers. Most of the teachers considered that this approach is effective in strengthening students' character, especially in terms of

appreciating differences, developing tolerance attitudes, and reducing negative stereotypes and prejudices. This finding is in line with the views of Banks (2015) who emphasizes that multicultural education is a strategic tool in building social awareness and creating an inclusive learning environment. In the context of Indonesia's plural society, the success of multicultural learning is crucial to anticipate potential conflicts stemming from differences in beliefs and cultures.

The application of the PBL model is considered relevant because it can theoretically develop students' critical, analytical and solution thinking skills (Arends, 2012). This model links real problems with the learning process, thus encouraging students to not only understand the material conceptually, but also internalize the values of religious moderation through collaborative practice. Thus, the multicultural PBL model is not just a pedagogical strategy, but also an instrument to shape social competencies and 21st century skills, such as communication, collaboration, and empathy for diversity. This result also strengthens the findings of Yulianto and Santosa (2020) who stated that problem-based learning is able to increase students' social awareness and problem-solving skills contextually.

The implications of this research indicate that the integration of multicultural problem-based learning in the Elementary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah curriculum needs to be systematically strengthened. The development of thematic teaching materials, based on diversity issues, and teacher training are strategic steps in realizing inclusive and reflective learning. Teachers not only act as facilitators, but also as role models in instilling the values of religious moderation, so that the internalization process can run effectively. In addition, schools need to create a supportive social climate through anti-discrimination policies, interfaith activities, and strengthening tolerance-based school culture. This is in line with the direction of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) that religious moderation education should be a priority in producing a religious, democratic and nationalistic-minded generation.

In the long run, the application of multicultural problem-based learning is not only useful for social studies or Civics learning, but can also be integrated into all subjects through a thematic approach. Strengthening the values of religious moderation since basic education is expected to be able to form an inclusive mindset and respectful attitude that is sustainable to higher education levels. Therefore, this research confirms that adaptive, participatory, and real problem-based learning strategies are key in realizing an educational ecosystem that is resilient to the potential for intolerance and social conflict.

Religious Moderation Attitude: National Commitment

Data from the distribution of questionnaires to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers to see the description of religious moderation attitudes: national commitment can be seen in the questionnaire results below:

Table 2. Questionnaire results of religious moderation: national commitment

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Through multicultural problem-based learning, students appreciate differences and diversity as part of the unity of the nation.	35.6 %	64.4 %	0.0%	0.0%

2	Without the implementation of multicultural problem-based learning, students tend to be less encouraged to be active in maintaining national unity and integrity.	17.8 %	64.4 %	17.8 %	0.0%
3	This approach encourages students to respect the different religious beliefs and practices of others.	28.7 %	68.3 %	3.0%	0.0%

Column headers:

SS: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Based on the questionnaire results presented, it can be concluded that the problem-based learning approach with a multicultural perspective is effective in instilling an understanding of the importance of diversity in the context of Indonesian unity. This finding indicates that the majority of teachers consider this model to be in line with the values of Unity in Diversity and supports the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile which emphasizes the dimensions of gotong royong, global diversity, and critical reasoning (Kemdikbud, 2020). Thus, multicultural problem-based learning is not just a pedagogical tool, but a strategic means to internalize national values and religious moderation from an early age.

The results also show that this approach is able to shape tolerant, open and inclusive attitudes in students through contextualized learning experiences. As stated by Banks (2015), multicultural education functions to create learning opportunities that accommodate the diversity of learners' backgrounds so as to foster mutual understanding and empathy. This is reinforced by Arends' (2012) view that problem-based learning helps learners develop critical thinking, collaboration skills, and real situation-based problem solving. Thus, learning does not only stop at cognitive understanding, but also internalizes the social attitudes needed to live in a pluralistic society.

The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of curriculum development that incorporates multicultural approaches into daily learning practices. Teachers need to receive intensive training to be able to design and implement problem-based learning that is relevant to diversity issues. In addition, schools need to create an ecosystem that supports the value of inclusiveness through anti-discrimination policies, cross-cultural activity programs, and strengthening tolerance-based school culture (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). These efforts not only aim to shape student character, but also as a preventive measure to minimize the potential for intolerance that can disrupt social harmony.

Attitude of religious moderation: Religious Tolerance

Data from the distribution of questionnaires to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers to see the description of religious moderation attitudes: religious tolerance can be seen in the questionnaire results below:

Table 3. Questionnaire results of religious moderation: Religious Tolerance

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Through multicultural problem-based learning, students have not been fully open in discussing religious diversity without prejudice.	10.9 %	63.4 %	25.7 %	0.0 %
2	The application of this method can shape mutual respect between religious communities from an early age.	39.6 %	60.4 %	0.0%	0.0 %
3	Multicultural problem-based learning encourages students to work together regardless of religious background.	28.7 %	71.3 %	0.0%	0.0 %
4	Multicultural problem-based learning has not optimally helped students understand that local cultures often contain noble religious values	10.9 %	63.4 %	25.7 %	0.0 %

Column headers:

SS: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Based on the questionnaire results, it can be concluded that the multicultural problem-based learning method succeeds in creating a learning climate that respects differences and instills religious moderation values systematically. This approach not only focuses on problem solving, but also integrates social experiences that encourage students to work together regardless of religious background. This is in line with Banks' (2015) opinion that multicultural education plays an important role in building inclusive attitudes and social empathy in a plural society. This success also supports the principles of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and the *Pancasila Student Profile*, which emphasize the importance of mutual cooperation and tolerance as the main characters of the Indonesian generation (Kemdikbud, 2020).

These findings have significant implications for curriculum development and learning strategies in primary schools. Teachers need to adopt a more reflective, dialogical and contextual learning model so that the value of religious moderation is not only cognitively understood but also internalized in students' attitudes and behaviors. A multicultural problem-based approach allows students to learn through direct experience, develop critical thinking skills, and instill awareness of the importance of diversity (Arends, 2012). Therefore, teacher training and the preparation of thematic teaching materials are urgent needs to support the consistent implementation of this method.

In the long run, the application of this model can be a preventive strategy in minimizing the potential for intolerance and religious-based conflicts. In addition, the school environment needs to create an inclusive culture through habituation programs that support cross-identity collaboration, so that learning does not only take place in the classroom but is also reflected in daily social interactions (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). Thus, this learning model is able to strengthen students' social foundation to be ready to face the reality of Indonesia's pluralistic and dynamic society.

Religious Moderation Attitude: Appreciating Religion-Based Local Culture

Data from the distribution of questionnaires to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers to see the description of religious moderation attitudes: respect for religion- based local culture can be seen in the questionnaire results below:

Table 4. Questionnaire results of religious moderation attitudes: Appreciating Religion-Based Local Culture

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Multicultural problem-based learning encourages students to maintain and preserve local faith-based culture	27.7 %	71.3 %	1.0%	0.0%
2	Multicultural problem-based learning helps students understand that local cultures often have noble religious values.	31.7 %	65.3 %	3.0%	0.0%
3	Through this approach, students appreciate local wisdom that comes from religious teachings and community traditions.	31.7 %	66.3 %	2.0%	0.0%

Column headers:

SS: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Based on the questionnaire results, the integration between multicultural education and religious teachings has proven to not only strengthen attitudes of tolerance and appreciation for diversity, but also build students' respect, care and attachment to their own cultural identity. This approach is in line with the concept of *culturally responsive teaching* which emphasizes the interconnection between cultural, religious and learning values to create meaningful learning experiences (Gay, 2018). Learning that connects the relevance between culture and religion allows students to internalize the value of religious moderation more deeply because it is associated with the reality of their lives.

The implication of this finding is that problem-based learning models with a multicultural perspective need to be designed contextually, involving local cultural elements, and strengthening moderate religious teachings. Thus, students not only develop cognitively, but also have social and spiritual intelligence that supports the creation of harmony in a plural society (Banks, 2015). In addition, strengthening multicultural education through the integration of religious values can prevent potential identity conflicts that often occur in modern society due to the influence of globalization and social media.

In the context of basic education, teachers play a central role in realizing this integration through the selection of reflective, dialogical and experience-based learning methods. The curriculum also needs to emphasize the value of diversity, tolerance and religious moderation so that learning can instill an understanding that is applicable, not just normative (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019; Kemdikbud, 2020). Thus, this approach is able to give birth to a generation that is religious, respects tradition, while being adaptive to global changes.

Religious Moderation: Religion-Based Anti-Violence

Data from the distribution of questionnaires to elementary school teachers and madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers to see a picture of religious moderation attitudes: Religion-based anti- violence can be seen in the questionnaire results below:

Table 5. Questionnaire results of religious moderation attitudes: Religion-Based Anti-Violence

No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Multicultural problem-based learning has not fully formed students' understanding that every religion teaches peaceful values.	17.8%	61.4%	19.8%	1.0%
2	With this approach, students are more open to thoughts that respect religious diversity without causing conflict.	37.6%	59.4%	3.0%	0.0%
3	Multicultural problem-based learning helps students understand that local cultures often have noble religious values.	23.8%	76.2%	0.0%	0.0%

Column headers:

SS: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Based on the questionnaire results, multicultural problem-based learning is proven to be very effective in building students' open-mindedness towards religious diversity, encouraging inclusive attitudes, and strengthening appreciation for local cultures that are full of religious values. This finding is in line with Vygotsky's social constructivism theory which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in shaping understanding and attitudes (Schunk, 2012). Through this model, students are not only invited to understand differences cognitively, but also experience them through a joint problem-solving process, thus creating a meaningful and contextualized learning experience (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

However, this study also revealed that students' deep understanding of the universal principle that every religion teaches peace still needs to be strengthened. This indicates a gap between conceptual understanding and internalization of spiritual values. To overcome this, it is necessary to develop learning content that emphasizes the substantial aspects of religion as a source of peace, through exploration of interfaith materials, interfaith dialogue, and reflection on religious values in the context of daily life (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). This approach is in line with the values of religious moderation that emphasize balance, tolerance, and non-violence as important pillars of student character building.

The implication of this finding is the need to strengthen curriculum and learning strategies that are more dialogic, reflective and experience based. Teachers need to be trained to facilitate cross-perspective discussions that foster empathy and multicultural awareness. In addition, the integration of diversity and peace themes in various subjects will encourage students to internalize the values of religious moderation more deeply, so that they grow as religious, democratic, and ready to live harmoniously in a plural society (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that elementary school and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah teachers perceive multicultural problem-based learning as a relevant and meaningful instructional approach for supporting the promotion of religious moderation in primary education. Teachers view this approach as contributing to the development of students' tolerance, respect for religious and cultural diversity, collaborative attitudes, and appreciation of local wisdom grounded in religious values. These perceptions indicate that multicultural problem-based learning is aligned with national educational priorities, including the principles of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, the Pancasila Student Profile, and the policy framework of religious moderation. By engaging students in contextual problem-solving related to real social and cultural differences, this learning model is perceived to facilitate not only cognitive understanding but also the initial internalization of social and ethical values necessary for living in a pluralistic society.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that multicultural problem-based learning can be utilized as a pedagogical framework to create inclusive, dialogical, and collaborative learning environments in elementary schools and madrasah ibtidaiyah. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on teachers' perceptions rather than direct measurements of students' attitudes or behaviors, which restricts claims regarding behavioral effectiveness. Future research is therefore recommended to employ experimental, mixed-methods, or longitudinal designs to examine the actual impact of this learning model on students' affective and behavioral dimensions of religious moderation, as well as to explore its implementation across diverse regional and institutional contexts.

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