



Unveiling Religious Moderation in Early Childhood Education in Indonesia: The Interplay of Agency and Hidden Curriculum in Kindergarten

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how religious moderation is cultivated in inclusive early childhood education through the interaction between agency and hidden curriculum, with particular attention to the roles of teachers, school leaders, parents, and children.

Design/methods/approach – This study employed a qualitative case study design at TK Pedagogia Yogyakarta, an inclusive early childhood education institution in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, involving seven informants: one principal, four teachers, one parent, and one student. Data were collected through classroom and school observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis to examine how religious moderation was produced through everyday routines, interactions, and symbolic practices.

Findings – The findings show that religious moderation was not formed primarily through formal instruction, but through the practical organization of school life. Teachers, school leaders, parents, and children collectively shaped inclusive dispositions through routines, relational practices, interfaith activities, and symbolic forms of participation embedded in the school culture. Values such as tolerance, balance, justice, cooperation, and respect for difference were internalized through repeated interaction, emotional safety, and dialogical learning. The hidden curriculum was central in mediating the institutional reproduction of moderation, enabling it to become socially embodied rather than merely declared as a normative ideal.

Research implications/limitations – Based on a single inclusive institution under supportive conditions, the findings have limited transferability and do not fully capture power asymmetries, subtle exclusions, or children’s longer-term meaning-making. Future studies across diverse, culturally grounded contexts—particularly in Muslim societies—are needed to assess the stability, adaptability, and contestation of the identified mechanisms.

Practical implications – Religious moderation in early childhood education cannot rely on curriculum alone; it depends on how pluralism is enacted through everyday pedagogy and institutional culture. Advancing this agenda requires integrated support in teacher preparation, relational climate, pedagogical resources, and family engagement to embed moderation as lived practice.

Originality/value – This study shows that religious moderation is institutionally produced through the interaction of agency and the hidden curriculum, extending beyond formal curriculum discourse and foregrounding culturally grounded dynamics in Muslim and other underrepresented early childhood contexts.

Keywords: Religious moderation, Early childhood education, Hidden curriculum, Inclusive education

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1. Introduction

Religious moderation has increasingly been positioned as a necessary response to exclusionary, intolerant, and extremist expressions in plural societies. In Indonesia, this issue carries particular urgency because religious diversity is embedded in everyday life while intergroup tensions continue to surface across different levels of society (Wijaya et al., 2021). In educational terms, religious moderation is not merely the rejection of extremism, but the cultivation of balanced, inclusive, and dialogical dispositions that enable children to live with difference without abandoning religious commitment (Pajarianto, Pribadi, and Sari, 2022). This issue becomes especially important in early childhood education because the early years shape children's moral imagination, social perception, and interactional patterns (Nuridin & Muqowim, 2023). The central question, therefore, is not simply whether religious moderation should be introduced in kindergarten, but how it is formed and normalized in children's everyday educational experiences.

Many existing discussions still assume that religious moderation can be transmitted through explicit instruction, thematic lessons, or curriculum content alone. This assumption is inadequate because children in early childhood settings also learn through routines, symbols, gestures, rituals, and interactional norms that structure school life. What is repeatedly encountered in these ordinary settings often shapes children more deeply than formal moral instruction. For this reason, embedding religious moderation in early childhood education cannot be reduced to curriculum insertion or policy rhetoric alone (Harmi et al., 2022). It also requires attention to how educators, parents, and institutions construct children's everyday encounters with difference, even though many still lack adequate conceptual understanding and pedagogical strategies for doing so (Lestari & Nopiana, 2024).

This study argues that religious moderation in early childhood education is better understood through the intersection of agency and hidden curriculum than through formal curriculum discourse alone. Agency refers to actors' capacity to act reflexively within enabling and constraining structures, making teachers, school leaders, parents, and children active participants in the production of educational meaning (Giddens, 1984). At the same time, the hidden curriculum indicates that schools transmit dispositions not only through formal lessons, but also through routines, symbols, role modeling, and informal interactions that shape children's orientations toward others (Jackson, 1968; Apple, 2012; Balboni et al., 2015). These concepts are analytically important because they explain how inclusive meanings are actively produced and stabilized in ordinary institutional life. Previous studies further suggest that when school environments embody moderation through inclusive rituals, dialogical spaces, and leadership modeling, children are more likely to internalize religious tolerance in practical ways (Hanafi et al., 2023).

Previous studies have examined important dimensions of religious moderation in early childhood education, but the field remains conceptually fragmented. Some studies emphasize the role of educators in fostering tolerance through classroom activities, storytelling, and moral instruction (Sari et al., 2023). Others show that local culture and institutional habitus can provide grounded ways to introduce moderation to young children (Qadafi et al., 2024). However, other findings indicate that religious education may also reproduce exclusivist tendencies when pedagogical practices privilege doctrinal certainty over dialogical engagement (Fajriyah & Riswandi, 2022; Shofi & Ismanto, 2022). This pattern suggests that religious moderation cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of religious teaching, but must be examined through the institutional and pedagogical mechanisms that cultivate or undermine it (Hidayati, Zaini, and Sya, 2024).

The broader comparative literature also shows that the issue must be read in a context-sensitive way. In Europe and North America, interfaith education is often discussed as a means of fostering mutual understanding in diverse student populations (Stearns & McKinney, 2020; Upeniaks & Ford-Robertson, 2023). In Southeast Asia, by contrast, religious moderation is more closely entangled with state projects of national identity, social cohesion, and citizenship formation, making its implementation politically and culturally specific (Marpaung, Azizah, and

Siregar, 2024; Suyuti Yusuf, Pajarianto and Sulaiman, 2025). Indonesian studies indicate that moderation-related initiatives in early childhood education do exist, but their implementation remains uneven and often depends on institutional commitment, teacher interpretation, and local initiative rather than a coherent framework (Nuridin & Muqowim, 2023; Qadafi et al., 2024). Moreover, such practices often remain concentrated in particular institutions instead of being systematically embedded across early childhood curricula at the national level (Fajriyah & Riswandi, 2022; Shofi & Ismanto, 2022).

Several limitations in previous research define the gap addressed in this study. First, empirical studies have paid insufficient attention to the differentiated agency of teachers, parents, school leaders, and children in shaping how religious moderation is interpreted and enacted in institutional life (Suyuti Yusuf, Pajarianto, and Sulaiman, 2025). Second, although the hidden curriculum is often invoked to explain children's value formation, it is rarely examined as a concrete institutional mechanism through which moderation is reproduced in routines, interactions, and symbolic practices (Obaid et al., 2024). Third, prior studies tend to foreground the normative promise of moderation programs without sufficiently examining whether such programs may also reproduce stereotypes, silence asymmetries, or marginalize minority beliefs (Subchi et al., 2022). These limitations indicate that the literature has not yet adequately explained how religious moderation is practically constituted in early childhood institutions as a relational and everyday process.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates an inclusive early childhood education institution in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, recognized for its progressive religious education and inclusive practices. Serving children from Islamic, Christian, and Hindu backgrounds, the school provides an important setting for examining how religious moderation is formed through daily educational life rather than through formal discourse alone. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes how the agency of teachers, parents, administrators, and children interacts with the hidden curriculum in shaping children's understandings of diversity, coexistence, and tolerance. Religious moderation is therefore treated not as a fixed curricular product, but as an institutional and pedagogical process embedded in ordinary practices, relationships, and school culture. In this way, the study seeks to contribute empirical and conceptual insight to debates on religious moderation in education while offering a more grounded basis for policy reflection on early childhood curricula.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how religious moderation was cultivated in an inclusive early childhood education setting through the interplay of agency and hidden curriculum. Rather than treating religious moderation as a formal curricular outcome alone, this study approached it as a lived institutional process embedded in daily routines, interactions, and pedagogical practices. A case study design was selected because the study sought to understand how meanings, values, and dispositions were produced and negotiated in a natural educational setting (Cresswell, 2017). The research was therefore oriented toward interpreting how teachers, school leaders, parents, and children participated in shaping inclusive dispositions in practice within a bounded institutional context. More specifically, the study focused on one inclusive kindergarten with established interfaith educational practices as the case under investigation.

2.2. Setting

The study was conducted at TK Pedagogia Yogyakarta, an inclusive early childhood education institution located in an urban area of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The institution was selected because it had a longstanding reputation for inclusive pedagogy and for accommodating children from Muslim, Christian, and Hindu families within the same school environment. The school regularly incorporated shared-value learning, interreligious celebrations, collaborative classroom activities, and inclusive routines into everyday educational life. These features made the

institution a relevant case for examining how religious moderation was enacted not only through formal instruction but also through ordinary school culture. Data were collected over a seven-week period from January to February 2024.

2.3. Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the school's religious moderation practices and their capacity to provide information relevant to the study focus. The study involved seven informants: one classroom teacher, one school principal, three religious studies teachers representing Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, one parent from an interfaith family, and one student who had participated in interfaith learning activities. The inclusion criteria for educators were a minimum of five years of teaching or leadership experience and active engagement in inclusive educational practices at the institution. The parent participant was selected because of direct experience in supporting children's learning across religious difference, while the student participant was included because of active participation in classroom activities and school programs related to diversity. Although the number of participants was limited, they were chosen to represent key positions through which religious moderation was interpreted, enacted, and experienced in the school.

Table 1. Research Participants

No	Participant Category	Informant Code
1	Classroom Teacher	T-01
2	School Principal	T-02
3	Islamic Studies Teacher	T-03
4	Christian Studies Teacher	T-04
5	Hindu Studies Teacher	T-05
6	Parent	P-01
7	Student, Class B Yudistira	C-01

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom and school observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on classroom interaction, interreligious activities, daily routines, teacher-child communication, peer relations, and school rituals that potentially reflected the hidden curriculum of religious moderation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all adult participants to explore their understandings, experiences, and strategies in cultivating inclusive values in the school context. Interview prompts covered perceptions of religious moderation, roles of different actors, examples of inclusive practice, and challenges encountered in implementation. Document analysis included school guidelines, lesson plans, institutional documents, photographs of school activities, and other materials relevant to the school's inclusive educational practices.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data and to identify recurring patterns related to actors' roles, forms of interaction, school routines, and symbolic practices associated with religious moderation. Initial codes were generated manually from these data, including codes such as inclusive teaching strategies, interfaith celebration, teacher modeling, child social interaction, parental reinforcement, and shared ritual practices. The codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into themes that captured the interplay between agency and hidden curriculum. The resulting themes were subsequently reviewed, defined, and interpreted across data sources to ensure coherence, consistency, and analytic depth.

2.6. Trustworthiness, Research Rigour, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance trustworthiness and research rigour, the study applied source triangulation by comparing accounts from teachers, the principal, the parent, and the student, and method triangulation by integrating observation, interview, and document data. Member checking, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and thick description were used to verify interpretations, document analytic decisions, and strengthen the credibility of the findings. During fieldwork, the researcher adopted an observer-as-participant position, remaining primarily an observer while maintaining limited interaction to build rapport, clarify events, and understand participants' perspectives. This role was intended to minimize intervention in children's natural learning environment while allowing close observation of routines, rituals, and interfaith interactions as they occurred in practice. Fieldnotes were written continuously to record observed events, interactional patterns, and reflexive notes concerning the researcher's presence in the setting. Ethical safeguards included anonymizing participants, obtaining informed consent from adult participants and parental consent for the child participant, maintaining a non-intrusive role during data collection, and securing institutional ethical clearance with the reference number withheld during the review process.

3. Result

3.1. The Role of Agency in Instilling Religious Moderation in an Inclusive Early Childhood Education Setting

The context of inclusive early childhood education highlights the essential roles played by teachers, school leaders, parents, and children in cultivating values of religious moderation. Each actor contributes through specific strategies, interactions, and institutional culture that support pluralism, tolerance, and mutual respect.

3.1.1. Teacher

Teachers in this early childhood education institution implement educational strategies that promote religious moderation through an inclusive curriculum, interactive activities, storytelling, and exemplary behavior. Based on an interview with one of the Islamic religious teachers (T-03), she emphasized that moderation values are conveyed more through moral and ethical conduct rather than merely religious instruction:

“Yes, it is important, but not in terms of Islamic or religious knowledge. What we implement is more about ethics and moral conduct. For example, when we teach prayer practices, we focus on what prayer is and its effects when we pray.” (T-03)

Observations indicate that teachers employ habituation methods in daily routines, such as shared prayers that all children can participate in regardless of religious background. Furthermore, children are accustomed to engaging in classroom and play activities without differentiating their peers based on religion. This is supported by a classroom teacher's remark:

“Nowadays, from what I see in the institution where I work, children increasingly understand that differences do not mean exclusion. If someone is different, that is fine. This is reflected in the children because we teach them to understand it that way.” (T-01)

3.1.2. Principal

The school principal plays a vital role in developing institutional policies that support interfaith learning. The school adopts an inclusive educational approach, which was articulated in an interview with the principal:

“Our school is an inclusive institution that upholds diversity. All religions and children with special needs are welcome here, so children become accustomed to differences from an early age.” (T-02)

Field observations reinforce this statement, showing that children are taught to respect cultural and religious diversity during classroom activities and flag ceremonies. The school also incorporates cultural celebrations as part of its educational strategy to introduce diversity. The principal added that spiritual guidance has long been tailored to each child's religion:

“Since I have been here, I have known that spiritual guidance has always been implemented according to each child’s religion. When we pray together, we use general prayers so that all children can participate.” (T-02)

3.1.3. Parents

Parents also play a critical role in instilling religious moderation. In an interview, a parent (P-01) affirmed that the values imparted by the school influence children's attitudes and behaviors at home:

“The impact of religious moderation taught at school affects values such as kindness, honesty, empathy, etc.” (P-01)

However, parents face challenges in reinforcing these values, particularly due to external ideological influences:

“The challenge in teaching religious moderation is external ideologies like liberalism and secularism.” (P-01)

Observations show that children who receive consistent support from their parents in understanding moderation values tend to display higher tolerance in peer interactions. Parents also contribute by teaching children to respect religious diversity and encouraging openness to different beliefs in their surroundings.

3.1.4. Children

Children, as social agents, demonstrate their capacity to internalize religious moderation through daily interactions. Observations reveal that children show tolerance and mutual respect across various situations. For example, during spiritual guidance sessions, children of different faiths respect their peers who are worshipping:

“Observations show that children respect their friends when they are praying. They do not interrupt and wait patiently.” (C-01)

In one of the classrooms, children were observed interacting without regard for religious background. They played and learned together in an inclusive manner. A Christian religious teacher (T-04) underscored the importance of fostering tolerance from an early age:

“In my opinion, religious tolerance is essential. Many children only befriend those of the same religion, whereas they should learn to respect and appreciate their friends with different religious beliefs.” (T-04)

From this study, it can be concluded that the cultivation of religious moderation values is shaped by the active involvement of four key actors: teachers, the principal, parents, and children. These actors function as social agents in creating an inclusive and tolerant environment. Teachers act as facilitators who design an inclusive curriculum and apply teaching methods that promote tolerance. The principal serves as a policymaker who creates an inclusive school atmosphere and encourages interfaith programs. Parents play the role of primary supporters who reinforce moderation values at home and provide real-life examples for their children. As central participants, children demonstrate the outcomes of internalizing moderation values through their daily social interactions.

To provide a clearer overview of how each educational stakeholder contributes to the cultivation of religious moderation in an inclusive setting, their respective roles have been categorized and summarized in [Table 2](#). This tabular representation helps to contextualize the collaborative efforts occurring within the institution, offering a concise depiction of how moderation values are integrated through school practices and home environments.

Table 2. The Role of Agency in Developing Religious Moderation in an Inclusive Early Childhood Education Setting

Actors	Role in Religious Moderation
Teachers	Integrating moderation values into the curriculum, implementing interactive teaching methods, and providing exemplary behavior.
Principal	Establishing inclusive policies, supporting interfaith programs, and creating a harmonious learning environment.
Parents	Instilling moderation values at home, providing real-life examples in daily life, and supporting inclusive education.
Children	Internalizing tolerance values through social interactions, respecting differences, and participating in interfaith activities.

The [table 2](#) illustrates that each agent plays a complementary role in shaping a culture of moderation within the school. Teachers serve as facilitators who integrate moderation values into the curriculum and teaching practices. The principal functions as a policymaker who ensures that the school environment supports diversity and interfaith engagement. Parents reinforce moderation values at home by setting daily examples and supporting inclusive education. Children demonstrate the internalization of these values through respectful interactions and participation in inclusive activities. The collaborative involvement of these agents helps build a harmonious and inclusive educational setting that nurtures social development and character formation from an early age. The impact of the involvement of all these actors is the creation of a harmonious, inclusive educational environment that supports children's social development and character formation and fosters a moderate and tolerant attitude towards religious and cultural differences.

3.2. Religious Moderation Values in an Inclusive Kindergarten Setting

This study explores the cultivation of religious moderation values in early childhood education at an anonymized kindergarten located in Yogyakarta. The discussion is based on interviews, observations, and documentation conducted at the school.

3.2.1. Tasamuh (Tolerance)

Tolerance is a core value emphasized in the school's religious moderation approach. An interview with a Christian religion teacher illustrates the importance of fostering tolerance to help children appreciate differences. She explained:

"In my opinion, religious tolerance is essential. Given the current situation, many children choose their friends based on religious similarities. With good character, children who practice tolerance will be able to respect their friends despite differences" (T-04).

Observations indicate that children socialize with peers from different religious backgrounds without discrimination. For example, during group play with Lego blocks, children were seen helping one another construct buildings regardless of religious identity. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), children were observed building Lego structures together, engaging in inclusive, respectful cooperation—reflecting the lived experience of mutual understanding. Meanwhile, *tawazun* (balance) is nurtured by encouraging respect for spiritual practices and ensuring equal participation in national and religious ceremonies.

3.2.2. Tawazun (Balance)

The value of balance is instilled through practices that ensure fairness in religious expression and social participation. One teacher from the Class B Yudistira group stated:

"We always teach children to respect one another, for example, by not disturbing friends who are praying or practicing their religion" (T-01).

This is evident in the way children are taught to respect different faith traditions and to avoid interrupting peers during spiritual moments. During flag ceremonies, children from diverse religious backgrounds participated in an orderly manner, showing respect toward national

symbols and shared civic responsibilities.



Figure 1. Lego Group Play Interaction – Children collaborate in an inclusive setting, modeling the value of *tasamuh* through cooperative and respectful behavior

3.2.3. *I'tidal (Justice)*

Justice is cultivated by affirming the equal status of all religions in the educational environment. A classroom teacher emphasized:

"In our class, we always emphasize that all religions hold an equal place in daily life, and children must respect that" (T-01).

Observational data supports this statement. Children were seen offering space for their friends to worship, refraining from interruptions during prayers, and expressing their views freely during classroom discussions. These behaviors indicate that justice is understood not only as a value but as a lived norm among the children.

3.2.4. *Ukhuwah (Brotherhood)*

The concept of brotherhood is taught by encouraging harmonious relationships that transcend religious boundaries. A Hindu religion teacher noted:

"Early childhood is a crucial stage for instilling religious moderation values. This period is often called the 'golden age,' meaning that the values children learn now will stay with them as they grow older" (T-05).

This was reflected in observations during playtime, where children were not seen forming religiously exclusive groups. Instead, they interacted naturally, shared toys, and collaborated in a variety of activities, demonstrating genuine friendship and social inclusion.

3.2.5. *Hubbul Wathan (Love for the Homeland)*

Patriotism is introduced through structured activities that emphasize unity in diversity as part of national identity. A weekly flag ceremony is one of the school's key strategies to promote nationalism. The school principal stated:

"The children participate in the flag ceremony in an orderly and respectful manner. Afterward, they are also taught about cleanliness, teamwork, and the importance of unity as citizens" (T-02).

In addition, classroom instruction includes lessons on various houses of worship from different religions. These activities serve to deepen children's understanding that Indonesia is a pluralistic

society and that respect for religious diversity is part of being a good citizen.

The values of religious moderation introduced in early childhood education are not merely abstract moral teachings but serve as a foundational experience of living with diversity. Children do not only learn about tolerance and justice; they begin to embody these values through daily interactions with peers of different faiths. Activities such as shared play and respectful engagement during religious practices foster an early awareness of pluralism. In this sense, moderation is not a concept transferred from adult to child but a lived experience that shapes the child's developing worldview. Education here becomes an act of humanization that nurtures the capacity to coexist.

When values like *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, *i'tidal*, *ukhuwah*, and *hubbul wathan* are embedded in daily practices, they function as dialogical experiences rather than normative prescriptions. Children are not merely recipients of moral rules but participants in a social reality that requires empathy and cooperation. Through structured yet inclusive activities such as flag ceremonies and open classroom discussions, moderation is modeled as a shared social ethic. This approach allows values to emerge from real encounters rather than imposed doctrines. It reflects the idea that meaning grows from lived experiences and collective interpretation.

3.3. Learning Strategies and Social Interaction in Instilling Religious Moderation

3.3.1. Interactive Learning: Discussion, Storytelling, and Group Activities

One of the primary approaches to instilling religious moderation in early childhood education is the use of interactive learning. This includes discussions, storytelling, and group-based activities that encourage critical thinking, active listening, and respectful engagement with difference. According to a school principal interviewed during the study:

"We always teach children to understand that their friends may come from different backgrounds. For example, when we tell stories about various religious holidays, we allow children to ask questions and share their experiences about how they celebrate holidays at home." (T-02)

Observations in one of the classes showed that storytelling was used to introduce religious diversity. Through stories about peers from different religious backgrounds and their unique practices, children were encouraged to reflect and respond creatively through drawings or group discussion. These storytelling sessions provided a meaningful and age-appropriate space for children to explore religious traditions and connect them with their own lived experiences. [Figure 2](#) illustrates a classroom moment where children actively participated in such interactive learning and responded through expressive activities.



Figure 2. Interactive Learning in Class

3.1.2. Cultural and Religious Celebrations: Introducing Various Traditions and Religious Practices

Cultural and religious celebrations are another essential strategy for cultivating religious moderation. These events are conducted annually to commemorate the major religious holidays observed by students. The aim is to introduce religious diversity in a joyful and developmentally appropriate manner. A Christian religious teacher shared the following:

"We ensure that children understand that every religion has different ways of worship. For example, during Christmas or Nyepi celebrations, we provide space for non-Christian or non-Hindu children to observe and ask questions without being forced to participate in specific religious rituals." (T-04)

Field observations confirmed that during these celebrations, children were encouraged to observe and inquire about the religious practices of their peers. They were also guided to offer respectful greetings to friends who were celebrating, thereby fostering appreciation for difference and mutual respect.

3.1.3. Dialogue and Collaborative Projects: Facilitating Interfaith Understanding

Dialogue and collaborative projects were implemented to deepen children's understanding of religious diversity through direct interaction. These activities provided opportunities for children of different faiths to work together and learn from one another. A classroom teacher explained:

"In our class, children often work in diverse groups. For example, in a project to create models of places of worship, they learn that different religious buildings serve the same purpose—to facilitate worship according to one's beliefs." (T-01)

In one observed project, children constructed miniature models of various houses of worship, including mosques, churches, and temples, using simple materials. As they built together, they discussed the differences and similarities between these places, including their physical structures and social meanings. These collaborative projects allowed children to engage in inclusive dialogue and develop empathy. [Figure 3](#) highlights one such project, illustrating how religious moderation is taught through cooperation and shared experience.



Figure 3. Children's Collaborative Project in Building Worship Place Models

Based on the findings, interactive learning, cultural celebrations, and collaborative dialogue emerged as the most effective strategies in instilling values of religious moderation. These methods are further supported by the hidden curriculum, where children learn indirectly through the school's norms, routines, and interpersonal relationships.

The hidden curriculum plays a pivotal role in this process. Without being explicitly stated, values such as tolerance and respect are embedded in the school's daily routines, social norms, and interpersonal interactions. Through consistent engagement with peers and educators in both

structured learning and informal settings, children gradually absorb these values. These interactions foster the development of inclusive attitudes, allowing children to understand and appreciate diversity as part of their social reality.

Evidence from interviews, observations, and documentation confirms that these strategies have successfully instilled a culture of respect for difference. Children understand the importance of treating others with kindness, regardless of religious background. Figure 4 summarizes the main learning strategies applied and the hidden curriculum's contribution to developing inclusive dispositions.



Figure 4. Hidden Curriculum Through Learning Strategies within an Inclusive Early Childhood Education Context

Figure 4 illustrates how interactive learning, cultural events, and collaborative projects naturally convey moderation values. Through daily experiences, children internalize tolerance, empathy, and appreciation for pluralism. These learning processes equip children with inclusive perspectives on religion and society from an early age.

The findings reveal that the cultivation of religious moderation in early childhood education is not presented as an abstract discourse but is enacted through meaningful and tangible learning experiences. Daily interactions, such as storytelling, collaborative projects, and religious celebrations, do not merely teach children about differences but nurture a socially grounded sensitivity. In these practices, moderation is not imposed as an external moral rule but emerges through dialogue, affective relationships, and reflective processes appropriate to children's developmental stages. The classroom becomes a social space where values of togetherness, empathy, and diversity are directly experienced rather than verbally instructed.

What this study demonstrates is that early childhood education holds strategic potential in shaping a generation that is open and inclusive, as long as values of moderation are not delivered doctrinally but cultivated through shared reflective life. From a critical pedagogical perspective, this approach shows that children are not passive recipients of values but are social agents who are invited to experience, understand, and internalize diversity as a social reality from an early age. In this sense, religious moderation becomes a living social practice, woven into daily life and supported by the hidden curriculum, which provides space for the growth of interfaith ethics during the formative years.

4. Discussion

Religious moderation in early childhood education should not be understood as a value that is simply transmitted through formal instruction. The findings of this study indicate that moderation is cultivated through everyday institutional processes in which children encounter difference as part of ordinary school life. This reinforces the argument that early childhood education has a

long-term influence on children's understanding of inclusivity and tolerance, not only at the level of knowledge but also at the level of disposition and practice (Ozer, 2020; Syaikhon et al., 2023). In this case, religious moderation emerged through repeated participation in routines, interactions, and school rituals that normalized coexistence across religious difference. The significance of the findings therefore lies less in proving that moderation matters and more in explaining how it becomes embedded in the lived structure of early childhood education.

The study also shows that agency is central to the institutional production of religious moderation, but not in the simplistic sense of assigning fixed moral roles to individual actors. Teachers, principals, parents, and children acted within enabling and constraining structures, and their actions helped shape how moderation was interpreted and enacted in practice (Giddens, 1984). Teachers were particularly important because they translated institutional commitments into concrete pedagogical interactions, including inclusive teaching strategies, relational role modeling, and classroom practices that made religious difference socially manageable for children (A. N. P. Sabdari et al., 2023; Izdihar Syifa Cahyani & Pamungkas, 2024). School principals played a structuring role by legitimizing institutional norms that supported pluralism, including practices such as universal prayer and inclusive school routines (Hidayati et al., 2024). Parents and children were not peripheral actors, because parental reinforcement and children's peer interactions were part of the process through which moderation moved from discourse into embodied practice (Abo-Zena, 2024; Pribadi, 2023; Pusztai et al., 2024; Anas et al., 2025; Sakti et al., 2024; Shofi & Ismanto, 2022).

These findings should not be reduced to a celebratory account of harmonious diversity. What this case shows is that moderation became durable because it was institutionalized through recurring practices rather than left at the level of abstract moral instruction. This is precisely where the hidden curriculum becomes analytically important. Religious moderation was not produced only through what children were formally told, but through what they repeatedly experienced in school routines, teacher conduct, peer relations, and symbolic practices embedded in everyday life. The discussion of agency is therefore inseparable from the discussion of hidden curriculum, because actors did not merely teach moderation but actively reproduced it through the practical organization of school culture.

The role of the hidden curriculum in this study supports the argument that schools shape learners through implicit educational messages carried by daily routines and social relationships (Jackson, 1968). The findings further suggest that religious moderation was internalized not only through explicit moral explanation but through ordinary participation in shared practices that rendered diversity familiar rather than exceptional. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that moderation values are often reproduced through the interaction of formal curricula, school norms, and lived social practices (Candra et al., 2024; Syaikhon et al., 2023). A sociocultural perspective is also relevant here because children's developing understanding of moderation was mediated through interaction with teachers and peers rather than acquired as isolated abstract knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Harmi et al., 2022; Kozulin & Gindis, 2007; Miller, 2022). What matters, then, is not simply the presence of tolerance discourse, but the repeated social mediation through which children come to inhabit inclusive ways of being.

The effectiveness of interactive and experiential learning in this study also needs to be interpreted carefully. Activities such as discussion, storytelling, collaborative play, and group work did not function merely as engaging techniques, but as social settings in which children could encounter plurality in relational rather than doctrinal terms. This supports earlier studies indicating that interactive learning strategies can deepen young children's understanding of religious diversity and inclusion (Adwiah et al., 2023; Koukounaras Liagkis, 2022; Purwani, 2024). In the same way, the use of visual media, school celebrations, and project-based activities appears important not because they are inherently innovative, but because they provide concrete situations through which abstract values can be socially experienced and negotiated by children (Danaei et al., 2020; Masdul et al., 2024; Nurdin & Muqowim, 2023; Suyuti Yusuf et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2024). Without institutional coherence, however, the same activities could easily remain symbolic or episodic.

The comparative implication of these findings also requires caution. It would be too

simplistic to oppose Western models as formal and Indonesian practice as informal, because both contexts contain multiple variations of curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional support. Even so, the present findings suggest that in this Indonesian case, religious moderation was more strongly sustained through experiential, relational, and culturally embedded pathways than through formal curricular standardization alone (Stearns & McKinney, 2020; Upenieks & Ford-Robertson, 2023; Lestari & Nopiana, 2024; Pajarianto et al., 2022). This indicates that the central analytical issue is not whether one system is more advanced than another, but how different educational contexts organize the relationship between formal instruction and lived pluralism. In Southeast Asia, and particularly in Indonesia, moderation is often tied to broader projects of coexistence, family involvement, and cultural ritual rather than to classroom dialogue alone.

4.1. Research Contribution

This study contributes by showing that religious moderation in early childhood education is not adequately explained through formal curriculum discourse alone, but is institutionally produced through the interaction between agency and hidden curriculum in the practical organization of school life. It further demonstrates that teachers, school leaders, parents, and children do not merely support moderation as separate actors, but jointly reproduce it through routines, pedagogical interaction, and symbolic practices embedded in the institution. In this Indonesian case, moderation was mediated less by formalized interfaith instruction than by experiential, relational, and culturally embedded educational processes, thereby clarifying a mechanism within a bounded institutional context. This contribution is relevant not only to research on religious moderation in Indonesia, but also to broader discussions of early childhood education, care, and development in Muslim societies and other diverse educational settings worldwide.

4.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. It is based on a single inclusive institution operating under relatively supportive conditions, which limits the transferability of the findings to schools with different religious compositions, institutional resources, or community dynamics. More importantly, the study has not yet explored several issues that are crucial to a fuller understanding of religious moderation in early childhood education, including power asymmetries among religious groups, the possible reproduction of subtle exclusion through inclusive discourse, and children's longer-term meaning-making beyond observed school routines. The case therefore shows what is possible under supportive institutional conditions, but it does not fully explain how moderation may become uneven, contested, or selectively sustained across wider and more complex social environments.

4.3. Suggestions

These findings have implications for policy and curriculum design, but such implications should not be overstated. The evidence from this study does not support a technocratic assumption that religious moderation can simply be inserted into national curricula as a fixed package, because its effectiveness depends on institutional and relational conditions within early childhood settings. Schools therefore need support not only in terms of curricular content, but also in teacher preparation, school culture, pedagogical resources, and family engagement if moderation is to become more than a formal slogan. Future research should move beyond single supportive cases by examining how power asymmetries among religious groups, subtle forms of exclusion within inclusive discourse, and children's longer-term meaning-making shape the sustainability of religious moderation across more diverse educational and social contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that religious moderation in early childhood education is not adequately understood as a formal curricular message delivered through instruction alone. The findings show that moderation was cultivated through the interaction between agency and hidden curriculum, as teachers, school leaders, parents, and children collectively shaped inclusive dispositions

through routines, relationships, and symbolic practices embedded in everyday school life. In this sense, the study's novelty lies in demonstrating that religious moderation is institutionally produced as a lived pedagogical process rather than merely introduced as a normative educational objective. The contribution of the study is therefore not only to confirm the importance of moderation in early childhood education, but to clarify the mechanism through which it becomes socially embodied within a bounded institutional context.

The study also indicates that the educational significance of religious moderation lies in its practical formation through repeated interaction, emotional safety, and dialogical learning rather than through declarative curriculum language alone. Although derived from a single inclusive institution, the findings extend beyond the immediate case by offering a context-sensitive contribution to broader discussions on early childhood education, care, and development in Muslim societies and other diverse educational settings worldwide. At the same time, the study does not support universal claims, since the institutional mechanisms identified here remain shaped by the particular cultural, relational, and organizational conditions of the case. Religious moderation in early childhood education should therefore be understood not as a fixed outcome to be inserted into policy by technical means, but as a socially cultivated disposition that depends on coherent school culture, teacher agency, and sustained family involvement.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

El Chamberlain Q. Abellana: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Project Administration, Writing - Review & Editing.

Ryan Angga Pratama: Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization.

El Atmani Zineb: Validation, Resources, Writing - Review & Editing.

An Nisaa Fitri Nugraheni: Conceptualization, Investigation, Fieldwork, Data Curation.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the involvement of children and community members, raw data is not publicly archived.

Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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