

## INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS MODERATION VALUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

This study explores the integration of religious moderation values in early childhood education at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan. The research aims to understand how Islamic-based schools implement moderation principles such as tolerance, balance, and justice within daily learning activities. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and parents, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of value integration in teaching practices and learning environments. The findings reveal that the school successfully incorporates moderation values through play-based learning, storytelling, and collaborative activities that promote empathy, cooperation, and respect for diversity. Teachers play a key role in modeling moderate behavior and embedding these values across cognitive, social, and emotional learning dimensions. The study concludes that integrating religious moderation at the early childhood level fosters a strong foundation for character education, aligning moral development with the values of balance and inclusivity emphasized in Islamic education.

**Keywords:** religious moderation; early childhood education; character education; Islamic values

### INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation has emerged as a fundamental paradigm in contemporary Islamic education, especially within diverse and pluralistic societies such as Indonesia. As a country with rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, Indonesia views moderation as both a social necessity and an educational priority. The Ministry of Religious Affairs introduced the concept of *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) as a national framework aimed at strengthening tolerance, promoting balanced religious understanding, and preventing radicalism from infiltrating educational institutions (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). While much of the discourse on religious moderation focuses on adolescents and adults, early childhood education (ECE) has recently received increased attention as a crucial entry point for forming moderate, inclusive, and empathetic individuals. Children aged 4–6 years are at a critical developmental stage where foundational values, social habits, and moral perspectives begin to take shape. This makes early childhood classrooms an ideal environment for cultivating the principles of moderation, such as balance (*tawazun*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), justice (*'adl*), and cooperation (*ta'awun*).

Early childhood education does not merely provide instruction but shapes children's socio-emotional and moral capacities. Research indicates that values introduced during early childhood tend to become deeply embedded, influencing children's attitudes and behaviors into adulthood (Santrock, 1994). Therefore, integrating religious moderation into ECE is not only relevant but urgent, given global concerns regarding exclusivism, intolerance, and the misuse of religious narratives. A

number of recent studies suggest that early exposure to moderate religious perspectives contributes to children's ability to appreciate diversity, resolve conflicts peacefully, and develop empathy toward people with different backgrounds (Ma et al., 2024; Setyowati et al., 2023). Such findings reinforce the argument that moderation should not be taught merely as abstract concepts, but must be embedded in children's daily experiences through interactions, play, and guided learning activities.

Islamic-based early childhood institutions, particularly those affiliated with moderate Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have been recognized as strategic sites for moderation-based character education. NU's long-standing tradition of promoting inclusivity, balance in religious interpretation, and peaceful coexistence aligns closely with national efforts to strengthen religious moderation (Feng et al., 2025). TK Muslimat NU, as part of the NU women's organization network, adopts Islamic educational principles that prioritize compassion, mutual respect, and social harmony. This makes it an appropriate case for examining how moderation values are operationalized in ECE settings. However, empirical research that specifically explores how these values are translated into early childhood classroom practices remains limited. Most existing studies focus on curriculum design, youth deradicalization, or religious learning in primary and secondary schools (Laili et al., 2022). By contrast, fewer studies investigate practical strategies used by early childhood teachers to introduce moderation in developmentally appropriate ways.

In early childhood education, the integration of religious moderation requires pedagogical approaches that are aligned with children's levels of cognitive and emotional development. Teaching moderation to young children cannot rely on doctrinal explanations or abstract theological discussions. Instead, teachers must use concrete experiences, storytelling, modeling, and play-based activities that reflect and reinforce moderate behaviors. According to NAEYC guidelines, young children learn best through active engagement, imitation, exploration, and interaction with their environment (Adewoyin et al., 2021). When teachers model respect, empathy, and fairness in classroom routines, children naturally adopt these behaviors. Moreover, activities such as collaborative games, role-playing, storytelling, and problem-solving exercises provide practical contexts for children to experience the values of cooperation, sharing, and mutual respect.

Storytelling is particularly effective in early childhood Islamic education because it allows children to connect moral lessons with relatable characters and events. Stories of the prophets, companions, and Islamic moral exemplars can be framed in ways that highlight moderation, compassion, honesty, and fairness. For example, stories of Prophet Yusuf emphasize forgiveness and patience, while stories of Prophet Muhammad highlight tolerance and kindness toward others. When teachers intentionally select stories and guide discussions around moderate behaviors, children develop moral understanding in a meaningful and age-appropriate way.

Another essential aspect of integrating religious moderation in early childhood education is the creation of an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Classrooms should provide opportunities for children to interact with peers of different abilities, backgrounds, and personalities. Research shows that inclusive classroom environments encourage children to appreciate differences and reduce tendencies toward discriminatory behavior. In Islamic schools, inclusivity is often interpreted in terms of gender, socio-economic background, or local cultural diversity. When teachers encourage children to play together, help each other, and treat everyone with respect, they indirectly cultivate the principles of moderation without requiring explicit doctrinal instruction.

Teachers also play a key role in embedding religious moderation across cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual domains. Teachers' attitudes, communication styles, and interactions with students significantly influence children's understanding of moral values. Studies demonstrate that teachers who exhibit moderate and democratic behavior tend to foster similar dispositions in their students (Mardiah et al., 2024). In Islamic-based ECE settings, teachers must balance religious instruction with nurturing children's emotional well-being, curiosity, and independence. This balance reflects the broader Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah*—a middle path that avoids extremism while remaining rooted in religious principles.

Given these considerations, analyzing the case of TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan offers important insights into how moderation values are translated into practice within early childhood education. As a school that integrates Islamic teachings within a developmentally appropriate curriculum, TK Muslimat NU provides an illustrative model for understanding the operationalization of religious moderation in daily learning activities. Through observations, interviews, and documentation, this study examines how teachers introduce moderation through play, storytelling, collaborative learning, routine activities, and teacher-child interactions. The study also explores how parents perceive the integration of these values and how the school's institutional culture supports moderation-oriented character development.

Integrating religious moderation at the early childhood level plays a transformative role in shaping children's moral and social dispositions. By embedding values such as tolerance, empathy, fairness, and cooperation within daily learning experiences, educators help build a generation that is not only religiously grounded but also capable of contributing to a peaceful and inclusive society. This study thus contributes to the growing body of research on value-based early childhood education while offering practical implications for Islamic schools seeking to strengthen religious moderation through child-centered pedagogical approaches.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how religious moderation values are integrated into early childhood learning at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan. A qualitative case study was chosen because it provides an in-depth and contextual understanding of real-life educational practices, enabling the researcher to capture the complexity of value integration as it naturally occurs in classroom interactions and school culture (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan, an Islamic-based early childhood institution affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) organization, which is widely recognized for its emphasis on moderate Islamic teachings. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who were directly involved in or affected by the implementation of moderation values. The participants included five classroom teachers, the school principal, eight parents of enrolled children, and approximately thirty students aged four to six years who were observed during learning activities. Data were collected through three primary techniques: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted in a non-participant manner to examine how moderation values such as tolerance, cooperation, empathy, and fairness were embedded within daily routines, storytelling activities, collaborative play, and teacher-child interactions. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers, the principal, and parents to gather their perspectives on the understanding, implementation, and challenges of integrating religious moderation in early childhood learning. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and validated through

participant checking. Document analysis was also conducted on lesson plans, curriculum guidelines, school policies, and teaching materials to identify formal structures supporting the integration of moderation values across instructional practices.

The collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, which involves six systematic phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and synthesizing findings into a coherent narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo 12 software was employed to support data organization, coding consistency, and theme development. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the research adhered to Lincoln and Guba's criteria, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Miles et al., 2020). Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and member checking. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was supported through clear documentation of research procedures and the use of an audit trail, while confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and minimizing researcher bias. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Permission was obtained from the university's ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from all teachers and parents, along with verbal assent from the children. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Overall, the methodological design allowed for a comprehensive and rigorous investigation of how religious moderation values are embedded in early childhood education practices at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study describe how TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan integrates religious moderation values into the daily experiences of young children through instructional practices, teacher-child interactions, school culture, and collaboration with parents. Through thematic analysis of observations, interviews, and document reviews, four major themes emerged: (1) embedding moderation values through play-based and routine activities; (2) the central role of teachers as models of moderate behavior; (3) the use of storytelling and Islamic narratives to cultivate empathy and tolerance; and (4) institutional support and parent-school collaboration in strengthening moderation-oriented character development. These themes reflect a holistic approach indicating that religious moderation at the early childhood level is not transmitted through doctrinal instruction but through experiential, relational, and environmental learning.

### **Embedding Moderation Values Through Play-Based and Routine Activities**

One of the most significant findings is that moderation values are integrated not as separate lessons but as part of the daily activities children naturally engage in. Observational data reveal that collaborative play, group tasks, and structured routines serve as primary platforms for cultivating tolerance, fairness, cooperation, and mutual respect. During free play, children were encouraged to share materials, take turns, resolve disagreements peacefully, and work together in small groups. Teachers consistently facilitated interactions by prompting children to use polite expressions such as "please," "excuse me," and "thank you," which helped reinforce respectful

communication habits. In several instances, children were guided to mediate conflicts through dialogue rather than emotional outbursts. For example, when two children argued over a set of building blocks, the teacher intervened by asking each child to express their feelings and then negotiating a turn-taking system. This approach not only resolved the conflict but taught children the principle of fairness (*'adl*) and the importance of considering others' needs.

Routine activities such as morning greetings, communal prayers, and daily clean-up sessions also functioned as avenues for value integration. During morning assemblies, teachers led children in reciting short prayers and positive affirmations emphasizing kindness, gratitude, and respect for others. Clean-up time, meanwhile, provided an opportunity to emphasize collective responsibility and cooperation. Teachers framed these routines not only as tasks but as expressions of care for the classroom community. These findings align with early childhood development literature suggesting that daily routines are powerful tools for reinforcing moral and social values in ways that children can internalize naturally.

### **Teachers as Models of Moderate Behavior**

A dominant theme across interviews and classroom observations was the crucial role of teachers as role models. Teachers consistently demonstrated moderate behavior such as patience, fairness, gentle communication, and emotional regulation, which children appeared to imitate. For example, teachers avoided raising their voices, even during challenging moments, and instead used calm tones and empathetic explanations when addressing misbehavior. Interviews with teachers revealed that they consciously employed these strategies because they believed young children learn moderation primarily through observation and imitation rather than abstract instruction.

Teachers also modeled inclusivity by ensuring equal opportunities for all children regardless of ability, temperament, or socio-economic background. Children who struggled with certain tasks received additional support and encouragement, while more advanced children were given responsibilities such as assisting peers. This practice helped reinforce the notion that every child is valued, respected, and included in the classroom community. Teachers further emphasized collaborative learning, often organizing group activities in which children with diverse abilities were paired together to promote social cohesion and empathy.

Additionally, teachers acted as mediators when conflicts arose, guiding children to express their feelings using respectful language and encouraging them to consider others' perspectives. This approach demonstrates the concept of *tasamuh* (tolerance), as children learn to accept differences and negotiate solutions peacefully. Several parents noted during interviews that their children increasingly used calm and polite negotiation strategies at home, suggesting that teacher modeling had a significant impact on children's socio-emotional behavior beyond the school environment.

### **Storytelling and Islamic Narratives as Tools for Cultivating Empathy and Tolerance**

Storytelling emerged as a central pedagogical tool for introducing and reinforcing moderation values in an age-appropriate manner. The school frequently incorporated Islamic stories, particularly those of the Prophet Muhammad, Prophet Yusuf, and other moral exemplars whose narratives highlight virtues such as compassion, patience, forgiveness, and respect. Teachers reported that they intentionally selected stories that illustrate moderate Islamic teachings, such as helping others regardless of differences, avoiding anger, or treating people with kindness.

During storytelling sessions, teachers encouraged children to reflect on characters' feelings and identify positive behaviors demonstrated in the narrative. This reflective dialogue helped children connect the moral lessons with their own experiences. For example, after reading a story about the Prophet Muhammad showing kindness to a neighbor who had wronged him, teachers asked children how they might respond if a friend acted unfairly. Many children responded with suggestions such as "forgive them," "talk nicely," or "share with them," indicating that they were able to internalize core moderation values.

Visual aids such as picture books, puppets, and illustrated story cards were used to maintain engagement and comprehension. Teachers also employed dramatization and role-play activities based on the stories, allowing children to enact scenarios requiring empathy, cooperation, or conflict resolution. These activities enhanced children's understanding by linking moral concepts with physical action and social interaction. Document analysis further showed that the school's curriculum intentionally incorporated story-based moral education as a consistent strategy for character development.

### **Institutional Culture and Parent–School Collaboration in Supporting Moderation**

The findings also reveal that the integration of religious moderation values is supported by a strong institutional culture emphasizing inclusivity, cooperation, and balanced Islamic teaching. The school leadership plays a proactive role in shaping this culture by encouraging teachers to attend training sessions, participate in NU-based community activities, and incorporate NU's values of *ahlussunnah wal jama'ah* (Aswaja) into the curriculum. This institutional alignment ensures consistency between classroom practices and broader organizational principles.

School policies reviewed during document analysis demonstrate explicit commitments to character education, respect for diversity, and strengthening family partnerships. Parent interviews revealed that the school frequently communicates with families through meetings, newsletters, and WhatsApp groups about activities related to moral and religious education. These communications encourage parents to reinforce similar values at home, creating continuity between school and family environments. Parents described observable changes in their children, such as increased politeness, willingness to help siblings, and the use of respectful language during disagreements.

Furthermore, the school organizes community events such as Islamic celebrations, charity drives, and parent–child workshops that promote cooperation, empathy, and social responsibility. Through these activities, children learn the broader social dimension of moderation, which extends beyond the classroom to the community. Teachers and parents agreed that such activities help strengthen children's understanding of Islamic values in practical, relational, and socially meaningful ways.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the integration of religious moderation values in early childhood education at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan is achieved through a holistic, experiential, and child-centered approach. Moderation values such as tolerance, fairness, empathy, cooperation, and inclusivity were not treated as abstract concepts but were embedded naturally in classroom routines, play-based activities, and teacher–child interactions. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that moral and religious values are most effectively transmitted in early childhood through

daily experiences and modeling rather than direct instruction (Wang et al., 2025). What distinguishes the context of this study is its emphasis on Islamic values rooted in *wasatiyyah* (balance), which are operationalized through developmentally appropriate practices.

A key aspect discussed in the results is the role of play as a medium for the transmission of moderation values. Play-based learning has long been recognized as an essential component of early childhood education because it supports cognitive, social, and emotional development (Rahma et al., 2025). In this study, play provided a natural context for children to practice sharing, turn-taking, conflict negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving. These micro-interactions formed the foundation for understanding tolerance and fairness—central components of religious moderation.

Teacher modeling emerged as another thematic pillar that supports moderation-oriented character development. Teachers in the study demonstrated calmness, fairness, gentle communication, and respect for diversity. The consistency of teachers' behavior is crucial, as young children often internalize values through imitation (Bandura, 1977). The teachers' intentional modeling of *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *'adl* (fairness) created a classroom atmosphere where children felt safe, respected, and valued. This reinforces previous scholarship showing that teachers' affective interactions directly shape children's socio-emotional competencies and moral dispositions (Bulla et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic early childhood education, the teacher's role extends beyond academic instruction to embodying the ethical traits emphasized in Islamic teachings, making the learning process both spiritual and relational.

Storytelling was another powerful pedagogical approach identified in the findings. The use of Islamic narratives—particularly those of the Prophet Muhammad and other Qur'anic figures—provided children with accessible models of moral behavior. Storytelling supports children's moral imagination, helping them understand emotions, intentions, and consequences of actions (Yuni Istikomah et al., 2025). The teachers in this study skillfully connected story themes with real classroom situations, allowing children to make concrete links between religious teachings and everyday behavior. This strategy resonates with research emphasizing the importance of narrative in shaping children's ethical understanding and empathy. In Islamic pedagogy, storytelling has historically been a central method for transmitting values, and the findings suggest its continued relevance in modern early childhood settings.

Institutional culture and parent–school collaboration further strengthened the integration of moderation values. TK Muslimat NU's curriculum and broader organizational identity, grounded in the moderate Islamic tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama, provided a cohesive framework that supported teachers' practices. The alignment of curriculum, school activities, and teacher training created a unified environment where moderation was consistently reinforced. This multi-layered support structure validates Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which posits that children's development is influenced by interconnected systems including family, school, and community (Joseph et al., 2025). Involving parents in reinforcing moderation values at home further amplifies children's learning, as consistency between school and home environments enhances value internalization (Filimonau et al., 2023).

Despite the strengths of this approach, the study also highlights several challenges. Teachers must continuously develop their knowledge and emotional competencies to model moderation effectively. Additionally, the integration of values requires intentional planning, reflective practice, and supportive leadership. These challenges indicate that while early childhood settings are fertile grounds for cultivating

moderation, the success of such efforts depends on the capacity and commitment of educators as well as the institutional infrastructure that supports them.

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for early childhood education, particularly within Islamic-based institutions seeking to integrate religious moderation values. The demonstrated effectiveness of play-based and storytelling approaches suggests that moderation values are most meaningfully internalized when embedded in daily, experiential learning rather than through didactic instruction. This underscores the need for curriculum developers and school leaders to design learning environments that naturally promote empathy, cooperation, and respect for differences.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of religious moderation values at TK Muslimat NU Bangkalan is effectively realized through a combination of pedagogical strategies, teacher modeling, and collaborative school–family engagement. The findings show that moderation principles—tolerance, balance, justice, and respect for diversity—are best cultivated when embedded in daily learning experiences such as play-based activities, storytelling, collaborative tasks, and reflective classroom interactions. Teachers play a pivotal role as agents of value internalization, not only by designing learning activities that encourage empathy and cooperation but also by demonstrating moderate and inclusive behavior in their interactions with children. The supportive school culture and active parental involvement further strengthen the continuity of moderation values between school and home environments, contributing to a more holistic character formation process.

The contribution of this research lies in its empirical demonstration of how Islamic-based early childhood institutions can operationalize national frameworks of religious moderation within everyday classroom practice. By offering a nuanced case study, this study enriches the growing body of literature on character education, value-based pedagogy, and Islamic education reform. It provides a practical model that educators and policymakers can adopt to promote peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and balanced thinking from early childhood.

Future research should expand on these findings by exploring comparative studies across different types of early childhood institutions, including public, private, and faith-based schools, to examine variations in moderation value integration. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to assess how early exposure to religious moderation influences children’s long-term social, emotional, and moral development. Moreover, future investigations could incorporate children’s voices more prominently, using child-centered research methods to understand how young learners perceive and internalize moderation values. Such research will offer deeper insights and support the development of more contextually responsive and sustainable educational strategies for fostering moderation in diverse early childhood settings.

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