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Religious Literacy Multiculturalism and Curriculum Reform in Contemporary Islamic Education

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Abstract: This article explores the role of religious literacy and multiculturalism as essential dimensions of curriculum reform in contemporary Islamic education. In the context of globalization and increasing cultural diversity, Islamic schools and universities are challenged to preserve their spiritual foundations while equipping learners with competencies relevant to modern societies. Using a qualitative library research method, the study synthesizes scholarly literature, policy documents, and classical as well as contemporary Islamic writings. The findings reveal that religious literacy goes beyond memorization of sacred texts, requiring critical interpretation, contextual engagement, and the application of Islamic values to global issues such as peace, environmental stewardship, and social justice. At the same time, multiculturalism highlights the need for inclusive pedagogy that integrates diverse cultural perspectives, fosters interfaith dialogue, and promotes civic responsibility. Curriculum reform initiatives in various contexts—including Indonesia, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom—demonstrate a shift towards hybrid models that combine traditional Islamic sciences with modern subjects and global educational frameworks, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). The study concludes that integrating religious literacy and multicultural approaches into curriculum reform can strengthen the relevance, inclusivity, and transformative role of Islamic education, contributing not only to individual moral growth but also to societal harmony and global peace.

Keywords: Religious literacy, Multiculturalism, Islamic education, Inclusive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century is marked by rapid and transformative changes in education, driven by globalization, technological innovation, and sociocultural shifts. The unprecedented speed of communication, the interconnectedness of societies, and the expansion of digital technologies have reshaped the way individuals learn, teach, and interact across cultural boundaries (Dede, 2014). Within this global context, Islamic education occupies a distinctive position. Islamic schools, madrasahs, and higher education institutions remain central to the transmission of faith, the preservation of moral values, and the cultivation of spiritual development. At the same time, they are required to respond to pressing issues of diversity, intercultural relations, and tolerance in increasingly pluralistic societies (Azra, 2013). These

dual responsibilities highlight the necessity for rethinking educational priorities and curriculum reform.

One of the critical concepts in this regard is religious literacy. Religious literacy refers not only to the capacity to read or memorize sacred texts but also to the ability to understand, interpret, and critically engage with religious traditions in their historical, cultural, and social dimensions (Moore, 2015). For students within Islamic education, religious literacy provides the framework for deep engagement with the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic scholarship while equipping them with the intellectual tools to engage constructively with followers of other faiths. Such an approach encourages mutual understanding and reinforces the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (mercy to all creation), which emphasizes peace, justice, and inclusivity (Halstead, 2004).

Equally significant is the principle of multiculturalism, which underscores respect for diversity, recognition of cultural differences, and the cultivation of civic values that sustain peaceful coexistence (Banks, 2010). In educational settings, multiculturalism requires not only the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives within curricula but also pedagogical strategies that promote dialogue and empathy. For Islamic educational institutions, adopting multicultural perspectives means recognizing the plurality of Islamic practices across different schools of thought (*madhahib*) and cultural contexts, while preparing students to engage responsibly in interfaith and intercultural interactions. This is particularly relevant in contexts where intolerance and polarization continue to threaten social cohesion (Hefner, 2017).

Curriculum reform represents the most effective mechanism for reconciling these imperatives. Historically, Islamic education has been criticized for its emphasis on text memorization and limited engagement with broader competencies required in contemporary societies (Dhofier, 2011). However, emerging reforms across Muslim-majority and minority contexts show a trend toward integrating traditional Islamic sciences with modern knowledge, including science, technology, and social studies. For example, in Indonesia and Malaysia, Islamic education reforms have incorporated religious studies with broader competencies such as digital literacy, communication skills, and civic engagement (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008). Similarly, in the United Kingdom and other Western contexts, Islamic schools are required not only to provide religious instruction but also to promote inclusivity, tolerance, and social responsibility as part of broader educational mandates (Memon, 2011).

These developments correspond with the objectives of global education agendas, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes

inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). In this light, Islamic education is challenged to move beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge toward a more holistic approach that includes critical thinking, problem-solving, intercultural competence, and digital skills. Innovative models such as technology-assisted Qur'an learning, online interfaith dialogue, and hybrid pedagogical approaches demonstrate how Islamic education can adapt to global demands while maintaining its faith-based foundation (Anderson, 2010).

Nevertheless, the process of curriculum reform in Islamic education faces substantial challenges. Resistance from conservative stakeholders often stems from concerns that multicultural or secular perspectives might undermine religious identity or weaken the authority of traditional scholarship (Sahin, 2013). In addition, teacher preparedness is a recurring challenge. Many educators in Islamic schools lack professional training in multicultural pedagogy, digital literacy, or critical pedagogical methods (Berglund, 2013). Inadequate resources, insufficient policy support, and rigid regulatory frameworks also limit the capacity of institutions to innovate and reform effectively.

Despite these obstacles, opportunities for constructive change remain significant. Research indicates that reform initiatives grounded in Islamic epistemology while informed by contemporary educational theories are more likely to succeed (Auda, 2008). Moreover, the values embedded in the Islamic tradition itself—justice, compassion, knowledge, and community—provide a strong foundation for integrating religious literacy and multicultural perspectives into education. By emphasizing these values, Islamic education can align with universal principles of peace, human rights, and sustainable development while maintaining its distinct religious character.

In conclusion, the integration of religious literacy and multiculturalism into curriculum reform is not only a matter of educational innovation but also a moral and social imperative for Islamic education in the twenty-first century. Such integration strengthens the ability of Islamic schools and universities to form graduates who are both deeply rooted in their faith and capable of engaging with the diverse and interconnected world. Through inclusive pedagogy, critical engagement with religious traditions, and intercultural dialogue, curriculum reform can ensure that Islamic education remains relevant, transformative, and aligned with both local needs and global agendas. This article explores the ways in which religious literacy and multiculturalism can be systematically incorporated into curriculum reform in contemporary Islamic education, thereby contributing to more inclusive and sustainable educational systems.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach using the library research method, which is suitable for exploring conceptual and theoretical issues rather than collecting empirical field data. Library research enables the researcher to analyze and synthesize existing knowledge, constructing a comprehensive understanding of religious literacy, multiculturalism, and curriculum reform within the context of Islamic education. According to George and Bennett (2005), library-based inquiry provides a valuable foundation for theory development and conceptual clarity, especially in studies that seek to bridge ideas across different domains of knowledge.

The data collection process relied on three categories of sources. The first consisted of academic literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and dissertations on Islamic pedagogy, multicultural education, and curriculum reform. The second included policy documents published by international organizations such as UNESCO and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which provide global frameworks and guidelines for inclusive and equitable education. The third involved classical and contemporary Islamic writings, which serve as both historical references and modern reinterpretations that address the challenges of globalization. This multi-source approach ensured the comprehensiveness and richness of the collected data (Zed, 2008).

The analysis of data followed qualitative content analysis, a method used to systematically identify patterns, themes, and concepts within texts (Krippendorff, 2018). To ensure analytical rigor, the study employed the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three steps. First, data condensation, in which large volumes of text were reduced into meaningful units. Second, data display, in which the identified themes and categories were systematically organized. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification, in which interpretations were refined by comparing multiple sources and validating findings through consistency across the literature.

To strengthen the validity and reliability of the results, the study applied triangulation of sources. Insights were derived from multiple scholarly perspectives and global policy frameworks, reducing the risk of bias and ensuring balanced interpretations. While member checking could not be employed due to the absence of human participants, credibility was enhanced through repeated comparison of findings across different authors and contexts. This is consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018) view that credibility in qualitative research can be maintained by ensuring transparency in data interpretation and cross-verification of sources.

Ethical considerations were also taken into account. Since this study did not involve human participants, issues of confidentiality and informed consent were not relevant. However, academic integrity was maintained by properly citing all sources and acknowledging the intellectual contributions of previous scholars. Upholding such standards is essential for ensuring that research remains credible, transparent, and aligned with international guidelines on research ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religious Literacy in Islamic Education

Religious literacy has emerged as an essential element in contemporary Islamic education, particularly as societies become increasingly pluralistic and interconnected. It refers not only to the ability to recite or memorize sacred texts but also to the capacity to critically interpret, contextualize, and apply religious teachings in real-life situations (Moore, 2015). Within Islamic education, religious literacy entails fostering a deep understanding of the *maqasid al-shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law), the ethical foundations of faith, and their application to contemporary global challenges such as peacebuilding, environmental sustainability, social justice, and human rights. This holistic perspective moves beyond rote learning and emphasizes the transformative function of religious knowledge in shaping individual character and communal well-being.

One of the critical dimensions of religious literacy in Islamic education is the shift from text-centered to context-centered learning. Traditional approaches often prioritize memorization of the Qur'an and Hadith without sufficient emphasis on interpretation and contextual understanding (Dhofier, 2011). While memorization remains important for preserving the authenticity of sacred knowledge, students must also be encouraged to engage with the texts in ways that respond to contemporary realities. For example, the Qur'anic emphasis on justice (*al-'adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*) can be linked to modern discussions on human rights and social equity. This approach equips learners with the intellectual tools to apply Islamic principles in diverse and evolving contexts (Halstead, 2004).

Moreover, religious literacy requires the development of critical thinking and dialogical engagement. Students should not only absorb religious knowledge passively but also analyze and question its meaning in light of ethical dilemmas and social realities. According to Sahin (2013), critical religious literacy enables learners to engage with religious traditions in ways that are reflective, dialogical, and socially responsible. This competency is vital for preventing

rigid literalism and for promoting a more nuanced understanding of Islam as a faith that is dynamic, compassionate, and relevant across time and place.

Another important aspect is the integration of religious literacy with global citizenship education. In an era of globalization, Islamic schools and universities are expected to prepare students not only as devout Muslims but also as responsible global citizens. This dual role is possible when curricula highlight the universal dimensions of Islam, such as justice, stewardship of the environment, and peaceful coexistence (UNESCO, 2015). For instance, the Qur'anic principle of humans as *khalifah fil-ardh* (guardians of the earth) can be connected with global discourses on climate change and sustainable development (Nasr, 2002). In this way, religious literacy reinforces the idea that Islamic teachings contribute meaningfully to universal concerns while maintaining their distinct religious grounding.

Furthermore, fostering religious literacy also contributes to interfaith understanding and tolerance. By equipping students with the ability to appreciate the beliefs and practices of others, Islamic education helps reduce prejudice and promotes peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. Banks (2010) emphasizes that multicultural education must integrate religious perspectives to cultivate empathy and respect among diverse communities. When Islamic schools encourage students to study both their own tradition and the religious diversity around them, they contribute to social cohesion and reduce the potential for misunderstanding or conflict (Berglund, 2013).

The development of religious literacy is also closely tied to curriculum reform in Islamic education. Integrating new pedagogical models—such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and digital technologies—creates opportunities for students to explore religious knowledge in more interactive and applied ways (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008). For example, digital Qur'an applications, online interfaith dialogues, and interactive learning platforms allow students to connect religious principles with real-world issues. Such innovations not only enhance learning outcomes but also expand access to knowledge in ways that align with contemporary expectations of education (Anderson, 2010).

Despite its potential, implementing religious literacy faces several challenges. Resistance from conservative groups, lack of teacher training, and limited resources often constrain the integration of critical and contextual approaches in Islamic education. Many teachers continue to rely on traditional methods due to familiarity and institutional pressures, which may inhibit creativity and reform (Memon, 2011). Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in teacher professional development, curriculum design, and institutional support.

Importantly, reforms must be sensitive to local contexts and rooted in Islamic epistemological frameworks to ensure both legitimacy and effectiveness.

Religious literacy is central to contemporary Islamic education as it bridges faith, ethics, and global responsibility. By moving beyond rote memorization toward critical engagement, contextual interpretation, and application of values in real-life situations, Islamic education can produce graduates who are not only grounded in their faith but also capable of contributing constructively to multicultural societies and global challenges. This approach ensures that Islamic education remains relevant, dynamic, and aligned with both its spiritual heritage and the needs of the modern world.

Multiculturalism and Inclusive Pedagogy

The increasing complexity of cultural and religious diversity in modern societies requires Islamic education to rethink its pedagogical models. Traditional modes of instruction that focus narrowly on the transmission of religious knowledge often fail to equip students with the competencies needed to navigate pluralistic environments. In this context, multicultural education becomes a crucial framework for developing inclusive pedagogy. Banks (2015) argues that multicultural education not only promotes respect for cultural differences but also strengthens democratic participation and social justice. For Islamic schools, adopting such an approach means preparing students to maintain their faith identity while simultaneously engaging responsibly with individuals of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

One of the core principles of inclusive pedagogy is the integration of multicultural content into curricula. This involves moving beyond a monolithic presentation of Islamic knowledge to include diverse interpretations, practices, and histories from across the Muslim world. For example, literature, history, and social studies curricula can be enriched with narratives from Muslim communities in Africa, Asia, and Europe, thereby demonstrating the rich plurality of Islamic traditions. According to Nieto (2010), exposure to multiple cultural perspectives fosters empathy, reduces prejudice, and broadens students' understanding of human experience. For Islamic education, this practice highlights the universality of Islam while acknowledging the unique contributions of local cultures.

Another critical aspect of multicultural pedagogy is the use of dialogical teaching strategies. Rather than relying exclusively on teacher-centered instruction, dialogical pedagogy encourages active student participation, open discussion, and collaborative learning. This method allows students to share personal experiences and explore differences in constructive ways. Freire (2000) emphasizes that dialogue is central to the process of liberation in education,

enabling learners to reflect critically on social realities and work collectively toward change. When applied in Islamic schools, dialogical strategies encourage students to connect religious teachings with broader civic and ethical responsibilities, such as justice, equality, and peaceful coexistence.

Inclusive pedagogy requires the cultivation of intercultural competence. In today's interconnected world, students need the skills to interact across cultural and religious boundaries with sensitivity and respect. Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For Islamic education, developing intercultural competence means preparing students to participate not only in local communities but also in global conversations. Activities such as interfaith dialogues, cultural exchange programs, and service-learning projects can provide practical opportunities for students to apply religious and ethical principles in diverse contexts.

The integration of multicultural and inclusive pedagogical models also contributes to the promotion of civic responsibility. By learning to appreciate cultural diversity and engage in respectful dialogue, students are more likely to become active citizens committed to social harmony and justice. Ladson-Billings (2009) highlights that culturally relevant pedagogy helps students succeed academically while empowering them to critique social inequalities and contribute to positive change. In Islamic schools, this approach aligns with the Qur'anic emphasis on justice (*al-'adl*) and communal responsibility (*ummah*), demonstrating that inclusive pedagogy is not a departure from Islamic values but a realization of them in contemporary contexts.

Despite its benefits, implementing multicultural and inclusive pedagogy in Islamic education faces challenges. Resistance from conservative stakeholders, limited teacher preparation, and inadequate resources often hinder innovation. Many educators are not formally trained in multicultural education or dialogical methods, which may result in a reliance on traditional approaches. Addressing these challenges requires targeted investment in teacher professional development, as well as institutional commitment to reform. By equipping teachers with the skills and confidence to adopt inclusive strategies, Islamic schools can ensure that their curricula remain both faithful to religious principles and responsive to the realities of diverse societies.

Multiculturalism and inclusive pedagogy are essential to contemporary Islamic education. By integrating diverse content, fostering dialogical learning, and cultivating

intercultural competence, Islamic schools can nurture empathy, reduce prejudice, and strengthen civic responsibility. These approaches ensure that students are not only well-versed in religious knowledge but also capable of contributing constructively to pluralistic societies. In this sense, multicultural pedagogy serves as both an educational necessity and a moral imperative for preparing future generations of Muslims to live harmoniously in a globalized world.

Curriculum Reform and Global Educational Trends

Contemporary curriculum reform in Islamic education increasingly aligns with international educational frameworks, most notably the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. This alignment underscores the need for Islamic schools and universities to integrate faith-based values with competencies required in the twenty-first century. Reform initiatives highlight the importance of three interrelated dimensions: the integration of religious and secular knowledge, the use of technology-enhanced learning, and the promotion of skills-based education. These dimensions are not only consistent with global educational trends but also rooted in Islamic pedagogical traditions that value holistic human development (*tarbiyah insaniyyah*) (Halstead, 2007).

One of the major priorities in curriculum reform is the integration of religious and secular knowledge. Islamic education has historically emphasized the study of classical sciences (*ulum al-din*), yet contemporary needs demand a more interdisciplinary approach that bridges these subjects with modern sciences, social studies, and global issues. This integration reflects the classical Islamic ideal of *al-jam' bayn al-'ilm wa al-'amal* (the union of knowledge and practice), which acknowledges that religious knowledge must guide and interact with worldly pursuits. According to Niyozov and Memon (2011), reform efforts that combine secular and religious subjects contribute to the formation of learners who are both spiritually grounded and socially competent, capable of contributing to their communities while engaging with global challenges.

Another central trend is the increasing use of technology-enhanced learning. Digital platforms, e-learning systems, and virtual exchanges have created new opportunities for Islamic education to expand access, diversify content delivery, and foster interactive learning. For instance, digital Qur'an applications and online tafsir studies allow students to engage with religious texts more dynamically, while virtual interfaith dialogues facilitate global conversations on shared values and ethical concerns. Al-Harhi (2014) highlights that e-learning tools enhance flexibility, collaboration, and learner autonomy, making them especially

relevant in religious education settings where traditional learning environments may be constrained. However, successful implementation requires significant investment in digital infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum adaptation.

In addition to content and technology, skills-based education has become a defining characteristic of curriculum reform. Islamic schools are increasingly expected to prepare students not only with doctrinal knowledge but also with transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and collaboration. These competencies are recognized as essential for navigating modern labor markets, civic responsibilities, and intercultural interactions. According to Fullan and Langworthy (2014), deep learning strategies that combine knowledge with real-world application are crucial for twenty-first century education. Within Islamic education, this involves designing activities that link Qur'anic principles with contemporary issues, such as sustainability, human rights, and social justice.

Case studies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom illustrate how curriculum reform is being realized in diverse contexts. In Indonesia, the Kurikulum Merdeka movement seeks to combine national education standards with greater school autonomy, creating space for integrating Islamic studies with interdisciplinary learning and project-based approaches (Sirozi, 2020). In Malaysia, initiatives to internationalize Islamic education focus on hybrid curricula that combine Islamic sciences, modern sciences, and global citizenship values, preparing students for both local and international engagement (Hashim, 2014). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Muslim schools are adapting curricula to balance faith-based education with national requirements on inclusivity, tolerance, and civic responsibility, demonstrating the challenges of operating in a secular yet multicultural environment (Mogra, 2016).

Despite these promising developments, curriculum reform in Islamic education is not without challenges. Resistance from conservative stakeholders often arises from concerns that integrating secular knowledge or global values may dilute religious identity or undermine traditional authority structures. At the same time, there is a pressing need for teacher professional development. Many teachers lack the training required to implement interdisciplinary, technology-based, or skills-oriented curricula effectively. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) note, teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning are critical determinants of successful curriculum reform. Without such investment, reforms may remain superficial and fail to achieve their intended impact.

Contemporary curriculum reform in Islamic education reflects both global educational trends and local religious imperatives. By integrating religious and secular knowledge,

adopting technology-enhanced learning, and prioritizing skills-based education, Islamic schools can prepare learners for the complex realities of the modern world. While challenges remain, particularly in relation to resistance and teacher capacity, the trajectory of reform indicates a growing recognition that Islamic education must evolve in order to remain relevant and transformative. Such reforms ultimately reaffirm the Islamic vision of education as a holistic process that nurtures intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious literacy and multiculturalism are fundamental to curriculum reform in contemporary Islamic education. Religious literacy enables learners to critically engage with sacred texts, understand the ethical dimensions of Islam, and apply them to contemporary global challenges such as peacebuilding, environmental protection, and human rights. This approach moves beyond rote memorization, emphasizing the relevance of faith in shaping character and addressing modern realities. Multiculturalism provides an essential framework for fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and preparing students to participate in pluralistic societies. Integrating diverse cultural perspectives and dialogical learning strategies aligns with both Islamic principles of justice and mercy and international commitments to inclusive and equitable education. Together, these elements ensure that Islamic schools cultivate graduates who are spiritually grounded yet socially responsible. Curriculum reform must embrace critical thinking, digital innovation, and skills-based learning while maintaining the spiritual and ethical essence of Islamic education. Despite challenges such as resistance from conservative groups and limited teacher capacity, reform represents a significant opportunity. By harmonizing tradition with innovation, Islamic education can contribute meaningfully to individual development, social cohesion, and global peace.

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