Integrating Religious Moderation into the Merdeka Curriculum: A Strategic Educational Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the internalization of religious moderation values within the development of the Merdeka Curriculum from an educational management perspective. Using a qualitative library research approach, data were collected through the analysis of relevant academic literature, including peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, and credible online sources related to religious moderation, curriculum reform, and educational management. The findings reveal that the internalization of religious moderation is realized through a systematic value transformation process encompassing moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action, which are integrated into curriculum planning, instructional implementation, and learning evaluation. From an educational management dimension, effective internalization is supported by strategic curriculum management, alignment of learning objectives with character education, and value-based pedagogical governance. These results indicate that the successful integration of religious moderation within the Merdeka Curriculum requires coherent management practices that connect curriculum design, teaching strategies, and institutional values. This study implies that educational leaders and curriculum developers should prioritize value-oriented management frameworks to ensure the sustainable implementation of religious moderation within contemporary curriculum reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamentally understood as a conscious and planned effort to create a learning environment that enables learners to actively develop their potential, including spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, moral integrity, and essential life skills needed for both personal and social life. Beyond the transmission of technical skills, education also encompasses the cultivation of knowledge, judgment, wisdom, and ethical awareness that shape

human character (Peristiwanti et al., 2022). In this sense, education functions not only as an instrument of cognitive development but also as a moral and cultural enterprise that contributes to human dignity. From an educational management perspective, achieving these multidimensional goals requires systematic planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating learning processes to ensure coherence between educational objectives and instructional practices. Effective educational management plays a critical role in aligning curriculum content, pedagogical strategies, and institutional values so that education becomes a transformative process rather than a mere transfer of knowledge.

Education significantly determines the future direction of a nation and its citizens by equipping them with the capacity to adapt to global challenges while remaining competitive and socially responsible (Maulana, 2022). The primary objective of education is to produce individuals who understand knowledge and truth, are spiritually grounded, and demonstrate obedience to moral and religious principles (Saharani & Diana, 2024). However, contemporary social and educational challenges increasingly demand the reinforcement of national values, philosophical foundations, and ideological commitments rooted in historical and cultural contexts (Khoiroh et al., 2025). Indonesia, as a nation founded upon ethnic, religious, cultural, and social diversity, presents a unique educational landscape that requires careful management of pluralism within its educational system (Dewi, 2025). From an educational management dimension, diversity necessitates inclusive curriculum governance and value-oriented leadership to ensure that education fosters unity without suppressing differences (Maulidah et al., 2023). Consequently, educational institutions must strategically manage learning environments that respect diversity while strengthening shared civic and moral values.

Religious moderation has deep historical roots in Indonesian society and has long been embedded within communal life (Barokah, 2025). The cultivation of egalitarian, humane, and tolerant religious values has served as a strong foundation for maintaining national harmony amid diversity. In line with this, the national education goals emphasize the development of individuals who are faithful, pious, morally upright, healthy, knowledgeable, creative, independent, democratic, and socially responsible (Hilmin et al., 2023). Religious moderation, therefore, is not merely a theological concept but a practical value framework that supports social cohesion. From an educational management perspective, embedding religious moderation requires institutional commitment through policy formulation, curriculum planning, and instructional supervision. Educational leaders play a pivotal role in translating moderation values into structured learning experiences that integrate cognitive understanding, emotional engagement, and ethical practice within the schooling system.

The promotion of religious moderation can be effectively pursued through education, which serves as a strategic and essential sector for cultivating moderate values endorsed by the Indonesian government. Theoretically and conceptually, education emphasizes the integration of knowledge, skills, and values to produce dignified individuals who are faithful, morally grounded, and socially responsible. Banks highlights that diversity encompasses multiple sociocultural dimensions, including gender, religion, ethnicity, language, social class, and abilities (NFatmasari et al., 2024). This multidimensional diversity underscores the need for inclusive educational management that recognizes differences while fostering mutual respect. Through curriculum management and pedagogical governance, educational institutions can create learning spaces that internalize moderation values as part of students' moral and social development, rather than treating them as isolated or supplementary topics.

One of the most crucial yet often overlooked components of education is the curriculum. As a complex and dynamic system, the curriculum represents both the starting point and the culmination of learning experiences and functions as the core of educational practice. It must be continuously evaluated and refined in response to societal, technological, and scientific developments. Rapid technological advancement requires learners to continually enhance their competencies and adapt to evolving knowledge systems. Consequently, educational institutions must manage curriculum development strategically to prepare future generations for global competitiveness. Educational management plays a vital role in curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation to ensure relevance and sustainability. As Cholilah et al. (2023) argue, curriculum design consists of structured learning plans that guide students through various subjects to achieve predetermined educational goals, highlighting the managerial nature of curriculum development.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes skill development, creativity, and learner-centered environments aimed at improving educational quality and addressing learning loss. Its flexible structure allows schools to adapt curriculum content to students' needs and local contexts while encouraging innovation in teaching and learning practices (Asbari & Santoso, 2023). From a management perspective, this flexibility requires strong instructional leadership, curriculum coordination, and continuous monitoring to ensure alignment with national educational objectives. The Merdeka Curriculum promotes diverse intrakurikuler learning experiences, enabling students to deepen conceptual understanding and strengthen competencies. Educators are given autonomy to select learning resources and strategies, reinforcing the role of teachers as curriculum managers who tailor instruction to learners' interests and abilities.

Within the Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education plays a strategic role in nurturing students' spiritual maturity, moral integrity, and practical understanding of religious teachings within the framework of national values. Learning outcomes are formally regulated under the Decree of the Head of BSKAP No. 8 of 2022, which emphasizes faith, ethical conduct, and social responsibility (Simon et al., 2023). The curriculum encourages learners to explore knowledge across formal and non-formal contexts, fostering creativity and independence (Radjak et al., 2024). From an educational management dimension, the successful internalization of religious moderation depends on coherent curriculum governance, teacher professionalism, and value-based instructional management. Therefore, examining the internalization of religious moderation within the Merdeka Curriculum through a qualitative library research approach is essential to understanding how educational management can systematically support value transformation in contemporary education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach. The research focuses on systematically exploring and interpreting theoretical and empirical literature related to the internalization of religious moderation, curriculum development, and educational management. Qualitative library research is considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of concepts, values, and managerial frameworks embedded in educational policies and curriculum practices. Through this approach, the study emphasizes meaning-making, conceptual interpretation, and contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement, which aligns with the objectives of examining value internalization within educational systems.

Data were collected from various credible written sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, and authoritative online publications relevant to religious moderation, the Merdeka Curriculum, and educational management. The selection of sources was conducted purposively based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the research focus. Data collection involved identifying, reviewing, and categorizing literature that addresses curriculum planning, instructional management, leadership roles, and value-based educational governance. This process ensured that the analyzed materials reflected both theoretical perspectives and practical implications within educational management contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis techniques. The literature was examined to identify key themes related to value internalization, curriculum management processes, and managerial dimensions such as planning, organizing, implementing, and

evaluating educational programs. Through this analytical process, the study synthesizes findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of how religious moderation values are systematically integrated into curriculum development and instructional practices. The qualitative synthesis enables the formulation of conceptual insights that highlight the role of educational management in supporting sustainable and value-oriented curriculum implementation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Internalization

Linguistically, the term *internalization* in the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI) refers to a deep appreciation and understanding of values, doctrines, or teachings so that they become beliefs and awareness of truth manifested in attitudes and behavior. Literally, internalization is an effort to understand and deeply absorb values so that they are firmly embedded within individuals. In the educational context, internalization is understood as a process of integrating knowledge (*knowing*) and the ability to practice skills (*doing*) into one's personality (*being*). This indicates that internalization occurs through specific stages aimed at achieving the embodiment of values. From an educational management perspective, this process requires systematic planning and structured implementation so that value education becomes an integral part of curriculum design and learning activities.

Internalization is essentially an effort to evaluate, deepen, and ensure that values are firmly embedded within individuals, particularly students. Islamic Religious Education emphasizes value-based education, which inherently requires an internalization process. The primary objective of internalization is the development of students' spiritual and moral dimensions. This development occurs when learners become aware of the values contained in religious education and transform these values into a personal value system that guides their attitudes, behaviors, and moral actions in daily life (Ardillah, 2023). In educational management, teachers function as key actors who manage learning processes by integrating value objectives into lesson planning, classroom implementation, and assessment.

Psychologically, internalization is defined as the integration of values into an individual's mind and personality. Loewald conceptualizes internalization as a general process in which social relationships and interactions are transformed into internal psychological structures. Similarly, according to KBBI, internalization involves recognizing teachings, doctrines, and values correctly and accepting their truth, which is then reflected in attitudes and actions. These

definitions highlight that internalization involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. From a management viewpoint, this requires educational institutions to create learning environments and school cultures that consistently reinforce values through leadership, policies, and instructional supervision.

Based on expert perspectives, internalization can be summarized as a process of transforming values from one individual to another, resulting in the adoption of those values as an outcome of the internalization process (Syafeie, 2020). This transformation occurs gradually through communication, interaction, and sustained educational guidance. Within educational institutions, effective internalization depends on coordinated management efforts, including curriculum alignment, teacher professionalism, and institutional commitment to value-based education.

Fundamentally, internalization begins at birth and develops through communication processes such as socialization and education. Chabib Thoha views internalization as a technique in value education aimed at achieving value ownership that becomes unified within students' personalities. Mulyana defines internalization as the integration of values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms within individuals. Peter L. Berger describes internalization as a process of interpreting phenomena, realities, or doctrinal concepts into individual consciousness. Meanwhile, Kama Hakam and Encep Syarief Nurdin define internalization as the process of transforming external values into internal possessions of individuals or groups (Nurkholis, 2023). From an educational management perspective, these views indicate that internalization must be intentionally managed through curriculum planning, instructional leadership, and evaluation to ensure sustainable value formation.

Religious Moderation
Definition of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation, referred to in Arabic as *washatiyah al-Islamiyah*, has been conceptually explained by scholars such as Al-Qardawi and is related to terms like *stawazun*, *itidar*, *ta'adr*, and *istikamah*. In English, this concept is commonly described as "Religious Moderation." Khaled Abu El Fadl defines moderation as the "middle path," a perspective that avoids both extreme right-wing and left-wing positions. Religious moderation can be understood as a balanced attitude between textual interpretation (*nash*) and rational reasoning, allowing individuals to adapt to societal differences without contradicting core religious doctrines. This approach emphasizes careful understanding and acknowledgment of diverse practices within the community. The focus of religious moderation is always on the interpretation and meaning of religious

texts in their contextual relevance. In summary, religious moderation promotes tolerance, inclusivity, recognition of different religious practices and beliefs, interfaith dialogue, mutual understanding, and peaceful conflict resolution, while rejecting extremism and religious intolerance (Aji et al., 2024).

Religious moderation is particularly relevant for Indonesia, given the nation's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. It represents a set of personal values—justice, balance, and equity—that serve as guiding principles for managing pluralism within society. Each member of society has equal rights and responsibilities to contribute to harmonious communal life and national development. Religious moderation is understood as a balanced attitude in fulfilling religious duties toward oneself and others, particularly among Muslims, achieved through constructing and applying knowledge in accordance with valid religious principles (Maulana et al., 2024). In educational management, fostering religious moderation involves deliberate integration of these principles into curriculum design, instructional strategies, and school policies, ensuring students internalize these values through structured learning experiences.

Religious moderation is manifested as a balanced religious attitude that emphasizes both personal religious experience and respect for others' practices to minimize extremism and fanaticism. The values of religious moderation are not only taught as a subject but also internalized in students' daily behavior. Given that these values reflect ethical and moral excellence, educational practices must address three core moral dimensions: moral knowledge, which includes moral awareness, understanding of moral values, perspective formation, moral reasoning, decision-making, and personal knowledge; moral feeling, encompassing conscience, self-esteem, empathy, appreciation for goodness, self-control, and humility; and moral action, which involves competence, willingness, and habitual practice (Chrisantina, 2021). From a management perspective, this requires educators and school administrators to strategically design learning environments that facilitate cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement with these values.

Five Principles of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation is guided by five main principles. First, *wasathiyyah*, the middle path, balances rationalism and textual literalism, ensuring adherence to *nash* while applying reasoned understanding. This creates harmony across all dimensions of life, including individual and social aspects, physical and spiritual well-being, ritual and social piety, and worldly and spiritual happiness. Second, *tasamuh* (tolerance) emphasizes the acceptance of diversity as a divine certainty (*sunnatullah*), encouraging communities to leverage their strengths for collective

good. Third, *usawah* (equality) stresses egalitarianism, acknowledging human limitations while maintaining equitable treatment across social differences. Fourth, *adalat* (justice) reflects impartiality in social and religious affairs, symbolized metaphorically as a balanced scale. Fifth, openness and dynamism highlight the adaptability of religious moderation to evolving societal contexts, embracing new knowledge while preserving local wisdom (Susilawati et al., 2024). From an educational management standpoint, these principles should be embedded into institutional policies, teacher development programs, and curriculum frameworks to ensure sustainable implementation.

The Concept of Religious Moderation

The concept of religious moderation in madrasahs centers on applying balanced and tolerant attitudes in practice. Students must understand that moderation does not imply weak faith; instead, it represents a wise approach to implementing inclusive religious principles. Maintaining the integrity of moderate religious values involves not only theoretical understanding but also embedding these values into the curriculum. Educational content should emphasize tolerance, respect, and interfaith cooperation, complemented by the principles of moderation. This approach equips students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to apply moderation in daily life.

Implementing the concept of religious moderation extends beyond classroom instruction, influencing students' interactions outside formal learning environments. Students are encouraged to practice facilitation values in social engagement, transforming religious moderation from a theoretical topic into a lived attitude. Furthermore, this concept plays a critical role in preventing potential conflicts within madrasahs, which often host diverse religious communities. Through facilitative approaches, students learn to appreciate diversity as a source of enrichment for personal and collective understanding (Evianah, 2024). From an educational management perspective, fostering religious moderation requires systematic planning, leadership oversight, and monitoring to ensure that both curricular and extracurricular activities support the development of tolerance, equity, and peaceful coexistence.

In summary, religious moderation represents a set of balanced, inclusive, and contextually adaptable values that are essential for cultivating harmonious societies. Its integration into madrasah education necessitates deliberate educational management, including curriculum design, instructional strategies, teacher training, and institutional governance. By embedding these principles into both formal and informal learning contexts, educators can ensure that students internalize moderation values, which ultimately supports social cohesion, ethical behavior, and sustainable community development.

The Concept of Independent Curriculum Development
Definition of Independent Curriculum

The term *curriculum* originates from Latin, *curriculum*, meaning a teaching material or course of study. In contemporary Indonesian dictionaries, curriculum is defined as a set of subjects provided by an educational institution or a set of courses in a specific field (Zaeni et al., 2023). The curriculum serves as a guide for organizing education. Teachers, as key actors in education, play a central role in achieving learning outcomes. Therefore, understanding curriculum guidelines is crucial, necessitating access to reliable sources of curriculum information (Akhmadi, 2023). Curriculum functions as a role model determining the success of learning processes. It is an organized teaching and learning activity that must be well-managed and systematically implemented by educational institutions both inside and outside the classroom. Etymologically, *curriculum* comes from the Greek words *runner* and *curare*, meaning a place of competition, while in Latin it refers to running, courses, or racing. In French, *courir* translates as running. Essentially, a curriculum is a structured program or set of subjects designed to achieve educational goals and ensure learning is purposeful and aligned with institutional objectives (Putri & Nurmal, 2022).

Crow defines curriculum as a systematic instructional plan or a set of subjects organized to achieve academic qualifications. Arifin views it as the entirety of subjects delivered within an educational system. MacDonald describes it as a strategy guiding teaching and learning activities. Murray Print emphasizes the curriculum as a learning space directly applied to students within educational institutions. Rene Oche describes curriculum as the sum of selected educational activities, including teaching materials and methods, planned to provide meaningful learning experiences. From an educational management perspective, the curriculum serves as a strategic tool for organizing learning processes, aligning resources, monitoring outcomes, and ensuring that institutional objectives are achieved.

The Dutch term *leer plan*, meaning learning plan, was initially used but was less popular than the English term *curriculum*. A curriculum regulates educational elements in madrasahs, including plans, objectives, and educational programs. Key actors include teachers, students, and the educational institution itself. The Indonesian government codifies curriculum management in Law No. 20 of 2003, Article 1, Paragraph 19, which defines curriculum as a set of plans, guidelines, objectives, content, and procedures for implementing education in educational units. Hence, the curriculum is both central and legally recognized as part of the national education system.

The Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) is a development of previous curricula, featuring varied intracycle learning. It optimally develops students' competencies by providing more intracycle learning time. Instruction is carried out using diverse methods tailored to the content and learning objectives. Educators have the autonomy to choose learning tools and teaching strategies to support student learning. To achieve the government's Pancasila Student Profile, learning projects are not restricted to specific subjects, enabling the curriculum to meet national competency targets. The Independent Curriculum also addresses literacy and numeracy gaps and is implemented gradually based on the readiness of each madrasah (Anas et al., 2023). This approach emphasizes educational management aspects, including planning, coordination, resource allocation, and monitoring of curriculum implementation.

Advantages of the Independent Curriculum

The Independent Curriculum simplifies and refines the 2013 Curriculum through project-based learning, making it more flexible, interactive, and focused on essential content while emphasizing personality development. Project-based learning trains students in collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, allowing them to experiment and work together using different approaches. It enables students to analyze problems from their perspectives and find creative solutions. This methodology fosters active engagement, problem-solving skills, explanation abilities, creativity, and cooperative attitudes.

Three main advantages characterize the Independent Curriculum. First, it focuses on essential content, enabling meaningful and enjoyable competency development. Second, it provides teachers with autonomy to teach according to student progress and development, while schools manage and adapt curricula to their unique contexts, centering learning on students' experiences, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and learning needs. Third, project-based learning supports character and competency development in line with the Pancasila Student Profile, allowing exploration of current issues such as environmental and health challenges (Andini, Rahma Putri, 2024). From a management perspective, these advantages require structured oversight, including resource planning, teacher professional development, and continuous evaluation to maintain quality and relevance.

Independent Curriculum in Madrasahs

The Independent Curriculum emphasizes creativity and national character development. It provides a solution to the increasingly complex and diverse educational challenges in the global era. It encourages students to learn actively, think critically, and develop independently. Madrasahs, as Islamic

educational institutions in Indonesia, adopt this curriculum in line with their vision and mission, which emphasize religious, social, and cultural aspects. Implementation must consider the students' needs and institutional context, requiring collaboration among madrasah administrators, teachers, and parents. Over time, it is expected to foster a generation of Indonesian youth who are creative, competitive, and morally upright (Muliardi, 2023).

Implementation also involves integrating academic competence development with creativity and character education. Effective planning requires strong educational management practices, including communication within curriculum development teams, coordination among stakeholders, and alignment with institutional objectives. Collaboration between madrasah curriculum developers and national curriculum authorities is essential to ensure consistency, quality, and adaptability of the Independent Curriculum (Ainissyifa et al., 2023).

In summary, the Independent Curriculum in madrasahs promotes flexible, student-centered learning that integrates competency, creativity, and character development. From a management perspective, successful implementation relies on strategic planning, effective communication, teacher autonomy, and continuous evaluation. By aligning curriculum objectives with institutional goals and students' needs, madrasahs can ensure the development of well-rounded learners prepared to face societal challenges while upholding ethical and religious values.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, internalization can be understood as the process of integrating knowledge (*knowing*) and skills (*doing*) into an individual's personal values and behavior (*being*). This process involves specific stages aimed at ensuring that values are deeply embedded within students, particularly in the context of Islamic education. Internalization fosters spiritual growth and moral development, enabling students to internalize ethical principles and apply them consistently in their daily attitudes and actions. From an educational management perspective, effective internalization requires structured planning, well-designed learning strategies, and supportive school environments that facilitate the holistic development of learners.

Religious moderation emerges as a crucial value for addressing the diversity of Indonesia, emphasizing fairness, balance, and inclusivity. By integrating principles of moderation into education, students are equipped to respect differences and engage in harmonious social interactions. The Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) complements these values by providing flexible, student-centered learning opportunities that enhance

competencies through extended intracycle learning time and diverse instructional methods. Its implementation allows educators to tailor teaching strategies to students' needs while promoting creativity, critical thinking, and character development. Together, internalization, religious moderation, and the Independent Curriculum form an integrated framework for fostering well-rounded, ethical, and socially responsible learners in Indonesian madrasahs.

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