

TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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Abstract. Islamic education plays a strategic role in shaping religious identity while responding to the challenges of increasingly multicultural societies. In plural contexts such as Indonesia, Islamic educational institutions are required to move beyond normative and text-centered approaches toward more inclusive, contextual, and socially responsive educational practices. This study aims to explore how Islamic education is transformed to address the realities of multicultural society and to examine the challenges encountered in this process. Employing a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving teachers, institutional leaders, and students from selected Islamic schools and pesantren. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to educational transformation, multicultural values, and institutional practices. The findings reveal that the transformation of Islamic education is characterized by a paradigm shift toward dialogical pedagogy, contextual curriculum design, and the integration of values such as tolerance, inclusivity, and religious moderation. Islamic educational institutions, particularly pesantren, were found to function as agents of social cohesion by promoting intercultural dialogue and community engagement within plural environments. However, the study also identifies significant challenges, including curricular rigidity, limited teacher competence in multicultural pedagogy and digital literacy, and insufficient institutional support. This study concludes that the transformation of Islamic education is both a pedagogical necessity and a socio-religious imperative in multicultural societies. Grounded in Islamic educational principles such as *ta'dib*, justice, compassion, and balance, transformative Islamic education has the potential to strengthen religious understanding while fostering social harmony. The findings contribute to the discourse on inclusive Islamic education and provide insights for curriculum development, teacher professional development, and educational leadership in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: Islamic Education; Multicultural Society; Educational Transformation

Article info:

Submitted: 30 July, 2025

Accepted: 31 August, 2025

How to cite this article:

Reni Haryani Rafid, Darmawati. "Transformation of Islamic Education in Addressing the Challenges of a Multicultural Society", *EDUCATUM: Scientific Journal of Education*. Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 89-94, September, 2025.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic education constitutes one of the strategic *agents of change* in shaping the character of the Muslim community and responding to social dynamics, particularly in plural societies such as Indonesia [1]. As a nation characterized by religious, cultural, ethnic, and customary diversity, Indonesian society demands that Islamic education not only preserve its classical scholarly traditions but also undergo a paradigmatic transformation to address the increasingly complex challenges of multicultural society. Multiculturalism is not merely about social diversity; it also encompasses the need for tolerance, respect for differences, and the ability to coexist harmoniously within a pluralistic social context [2].

This multicultural reality poses new challenges for traditional Islamic educational institutions, which often continue to adopt normative and exclusive curricula and educational approaches. In this context, Islamic education is expected to play a broader role not only transmitting religious teachings textually, but also integrating values of tolerance, inclusivity, religious moderation, and intercultural dialogue into learning processes and curriculum development. This expectation aligns with the demands of global society, which emphasizes multicultural competence, the ability to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and social skills that are adaptive to diversity [3]. The transformation of Islamic education implies the necessity of a paradigm shift that integrates traditional Islamic principles with approaches that are more responsive to contemporary social challenges [4]. This transformation is not limited to structural changes, but also entails substantive changes in ways of thinking, learning strategies, and leadership models within Islamic education. Through such transformation, Islamic education can evolve into a transformative educational system capable of developing learners' character that is not only religious, but also tolerant, critical, ethical, and broad-minded.

One of the primary challenges in this transformation lies in integrating multicultural values into the curriculum and pedagogy of Islamic education. Research by Wahyudha and Chanifudin [3] highlights that Islamic education in practice is often understood in a predominantly normative manner, rendering it less responsive to the realities of social diversity. They emphasize the importance of developing contextual curricula, dialogical learning approaches, and inclusive educational environments to cultivate attitudes of tolerance and respect for differences. Furthermore, this transformation is not only relevant at the primary and secondary education levels, but also crucial within the context of *pesantren*, Islamic boarding schools that have historically played a significant role in Indonesian society. Research by Afida et al. [5] indicates that *pesantren* have implemented various strategies to respond to cultural conflicts in society by promoting intercultural dialogue, social collaboration, and the development of harmonious relationships with surrounding non-Muslim communities. These findings demonstrate that *pesantren* can contribute meaningfully to the development of social cohesion in plural societies.

Another study by Zainuddin et al. [6] identifies several challenges in the transformation of Islamic education in the modern era, particularly within the context of Society 5.0, where technology utilization and pedagogical innovation have become integral components of the educational process. The study notes several obstacles, including limited infrastructure, insufficient technology-based learning facilities, and low levels of digital competence among educators all of which affect the capacity of Islamic educational institutions to deliver relevant education amid rapid social change.

Within the framework of Islamic education that is responsive to multicultural society, the concept of inclusive Islamic education has increasingly attracted scholarly attention. Research by Samsudin [7] emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive Islamic religious education curricula grounded in egalitarian, pluralistic, and empathetic principles as philosophical foundations for accommodating diverse student identities. Such an approach is expected to foster learning environments that are welcoming to students from all backgrounds, representing a crucial step in addressing the challenges of multiculturalism.

Moreover, the integration of multicultural values within Islamic education strengthens the role of education as an *agent of social cohesion*. Research conducted by Surianti et al. [8] demonstrates that Islamic values theologically support concepts of tolerance, moderation, and respect for differences, thereby positioning Islamic education as a powerful means for promoting social cohesion within schools and broader communities. However, the study also reveals that the implementation of these values in schools remains constrained by exclusive narratives within curricula and the lack of programs that effectively support cross-cultural learning.

Therefore, the transformation of Islamic education is not merely an academic or administrative necessity, but an imperative to ensure that Islamic education remains relevant and adaptive in the face of multicultural realities. This transformation encompasses changes in curriculum design, teaching methods,

teacher training, and leadership approaches that support the development of inclusive and tolerant character. Islamic education that successfully responds to multicultural challenges will foster a generation of Muslims who not only understand their religious teachings, but are also capable of living harmoniously within diverse societies an educational vision that is highly relevant to present and future societal needs.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an interpretive paradigm to explore the transformation of Islamic education in responding to the challenges of multicultural society [9,10]. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, perspectives, and experiences of educational actors in natural settings, particularly in relation to values of tolerance, inclusivity, and religious moderation embedded in Islamic educational practices. This approach is appropriate for examining complex social phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone.

The research adopted a qualitative descriptive and interpretive design, focusing on how Islamic educational institutions conceptualize and implement transformation in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture to address multicultural realities. The study was conducted in selected Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, including Islamic schools and pesantren, which represent diverse sociocultural environments. These institutions were chosen because they operate within pluralistic communities and play a significant role in shaping students' religious understanding and social attitudes. The multicultural context of Indonesian society provides a relevant setting for examining how Islamic education responds to issues of diversity, tolerance, and social cohesion.

A thematic analysis approach was used to interpret the data, focusing on key themes such as educational transformation, multicultural values, inclusivity, religious moderation, and social cohesion. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent data interpretation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of Transformation in Islamic Education within Multicultural Contexts

The findings indicate that transformation in Islamic education is predominantly understood by participants as a shift from a purely normative and doctrinal orientation toward a more contextual, inclusive, and socially responsive educational practice. Teachers and institutional leaders emphasized that Islamic education is no longer perceived merely as the transmission of religious texts (ta'lim), but as a process of internalizing values that enable learners to live harmoniously in pluralistic environments. This finding aligns with transformative learning theory, which emphasizes critical reflection and perspective transformation as key elements of meaningful learning. Transformation, in this sense, involves not only curricular adjustments but also a reorientation of educational goals toward developing learners' social awareness, empathy, and intercultural competence. In the context of Islamic education, this reflects an integration of classical Islamic values—such as justice ('adl), tolerance (tasamuh), and compassion (rahmah) with contemporary social realities. The results support the argument that Islamic education possesses inherent theological foundations for inclusivity and multicultural engagement. However, these values require conscious reinterpretation and pedagogical actualization to remain relevant in diverse social settings.

Integration of Multicultural Values in Curriculum and Pedagogical Practices

The study found that multicultural values were integrated into Islamic education through contextual curriculum design and dialogical pedagogical approaches. Teachers reported incorporating themes such as religious diversity, social harmony, and mutual respect into learning materials, classroom discussions, and project-based activities. Rather than presenting religious knowledge as absolute and closed, educators encouraged critical dialogue and reflection on how Islamic teachings relate to contemporary social issues. This approach corresponds with multicultural education theory, which emphasizes curriculum reform, inclusive pedagogy, and the recognition of cultural diversity as essential components of education in plural societies. The findings demonstrate that when Islamic education adopts dialogical and student-centered learning models, it becomes more effective in fostering tolerance and openness. Nevertheless, the results also reveal inconsistencies in implementation. While some institutions had systematically integrated multicultural perspectives into their curriculum, others relied heavily on individual teacher initiatives. This indicates that transformation remains uneven and dependent on institutional leadership and teacher capacity.

The Role of Pesantren and Islamic Institutions in Promoting Social Cohesion

A significant finding of this study is the role of pesantren and Islamic schools as agents of social cohesion within multicultural communities. Observations and interviews revealed that several institutions actively engaged with surrounding communities through social programs, interfaith dialogue, and collaborative activities involving non-Muslim groups. These practices reflect the social function of education theory, which positions education as a mechanism for fostering social integration and collective harmony. From an Islamic perspective, this role aligns with the concept of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy for all creation), emphasizing peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. The findings suggest that pesantren, often stereotyped as conservative institutions, possess significant potential to contribute positively to multicultural society when they adopt inclusive orientations. However, this potential is not always maximized due to limited resources, traditional mindsets, or external sociopolitical pressures.

Challenges in Transforming Islamic Education

Despite evidence of positive transformation, the study identified several challenges that hinder the full realization of multicultural Islamic education. First, curricular rigidity remains a major obstacle. Some institutions continue to prioritize textual mastery over contextual understanding, limiting opportunities for critical engagement with social diversity. This finding resonates with critiques of traditional religious education that emphasize rote learning at the expense of reflective and transformative learning. Second, limited teacher competence, particularly in multicultural pedagogy and digital literacy, was identified as a significant barrier. Educators acknowledged difficulties in designing inclusive learning experiences and utilizing technology effectively, especially in the context of Society 5.0. This supports existing theories that highlight teacher professionalism as a key determinant of educational transformation. Third, institutional constraints, including limited infrastructure and policy support, further restrict the implementation of innovative and inclusive practices. These challenges suggest that transformation requires not only individual commitment but also systemic support.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the transformation of Islamic education in multicultural contexts is not merely a technical or methodological adjustment, but rather a paradigmatic shift in how Islamic education conceptualizes its role in society. This transformation reflects a movement from a text-centered and normative orientation toward a contextual, value-based, and socially engaged educational practice. Such a shift aligns closely with foundational theories of Islamic education that emphasize holistic human development (*insān kāmil*) rather than the mere transmission of doctrinal knowledge.

From the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy, education (*tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, and *ta'dīb*) is inherently transformative. Classical scholars such as Al-Attas conceptualize education (*ta'dīb*) as the cultivation of proper moral and social conduct grounded in knowledge and wisdom [11]. The findings of this study resonate with this view, as participants consistently emphasized the importance of forming learners who are not only religiously knowledgeable but also ethically grounded, socially sensitive, and capable of engaging respectfully with diversity. This suggests that the integration of multicultural values does not contradict Islamic educational aims, but rather fulfills their ethical and civilizational objectives.

Furthermore, the results indicate that contextualizing Islamic teachings within multicultural realities enhances learners' understanding of religion as a living and socially relevant system of values. This finding supports the theory of contextual Islamic education, which argues that religious teachings must be interpreted in relation to social, cultural, and historical contexts. By encouraging dialogue, reflection, and critical engagement, Islamic education becomes a space for meaning-making rather than indoctrination. In this sense, transformation is achieved through *ijtihad* pedagogical practices reinterpreted efforts that bridge normative texts with lived realities.

The integration of multicultural values into curriculum and pedagogy, as revealed in the findings, reflects principles of inclusive Islamic education, which emphasize justice (*'adl*), equality (*musāwāh*), and compassion (*rahmah*) [12]. These principles are deeply rooted in Islamic theology and ethics, yet their pedagogical actualization requires deliberate curricular reform. The study shows that dialogical and student-centered learning approaches are effective in fostering tolerance and openness, echoing the Islamic tradition of *shūrā* (consultation) and *hiwār* (dialogue). Such approaches allow learners to encounter difference not as a threat to faith, but as an opportunity for ethical engagement and spiritual maturity.

The role of pesantren and Islamic schools as agents of social cohesion further illustrates the transformative potential of Islamic education [13]. Historically, Islamic educational institutions have functioned not only as centers of learning but also as moral and social institutions embedded within their

communities. The findings reaffirm this role by demonstrating how *pesantren* contribute to intercultural dialogue, conflict resolution, and community collaboration. This aligns with the Islamic educational vision of social responsibility (*mas'ūliyyah ijtīmā'īyyah*), where education serves the broader goal of societal harmony (*ṣulḥ*) and collective well-being (*maṣlaḥah*).

However, the challenges identified such as curricular rigidity, limited teacher competence, and institutional constraints highlight a critical tension between ideal Islamic educational values and contemporary educational practices [14]. From a theoretical standpoint, this tension reflects what Islamic education scholars describe as a gap between normative ideals and operational realities. While Islamic teachings strongly support inclusivity and moderation, their pedagogical translation often remains underdeveloped. This finding underscores the importance of teacher education as a transformative force, consistent with Islamic views that position educators (*murabbī* and *mu'allim*) as moral exemplars and agents of change.

In the context of Society 5.0, the discussion also points to the necessity of integrating technological competence with ethical and spiritual guidance [15]. Islamic education theory emphasizes balance (*tawāzun*) between material and spiritual dimensions of life. The study suggests that digital innovation in Islamic education must be guided by ethical considerations to ensure that technology serves humanistic and moral purposes rather than merely technical efficiency. This perspective reinforces the relevance of Islamic education as a moral compass in an increasingly digital and pluralistic world.

Critically, the findings challenge the assumption that strengthening multicultural values may dilute religious identity. Instead, the discussion reveals that inclusive Islamic education strengthens religious understanding by situating faith within ethical action and social responsibility. This supports the theory that religious identity is not weakened by openness, but rather deepened through reflective engagement with diversity. Such an approach aligns with the Qur'anic vision of humanity as diverse communities created to know and learn from one another (*li ta'ārafū*).

In synthesis, the discussion affirms that the transformation of Islamic education is both theologically legitimate and pedagogically necessary in multicultural societies. By grounding educational practices in Islamic ethical principles while embracing contextual and dialogical approaches, Islamic education can function as a transformative force that nurtures religious commitment, social cohesion, and intercultural understanding. Nevertheless, sustainable transformation requires systemic support, including curriculum reform, professional development for educators, and institutional leadership committed to inclusive and moderate educational values.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the transformation of Islamic education is a fundamental and unavoidable response to the realities of multicultural society. The findings demonstrate that Islamic education, when reoriented from a purely normative and text-centered approach toward a contextual, inclusive, and socially responsive paradigm, has significant potential to foster religious understanding alongside tolerance, social responsibility, and intercultural competence. Such transformation enables Islamic education to function not only as a means of religious instruction but also as a constructive force for social cohesion within pluralistic communities. The results reveal that the integration of multicultural values into Islamic education is most effective when supported by contextual curriculum design, dialogical pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures that promote inclusivity and religious moderation. These practices resonate strongly with foundational principles of Islamic educational theory, including *ta'dīb*, *tarbiyah*, justice (*'adl*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and balance (*tawāzun*), confirming that multicultural engagement is not external to Islamic education but embedded within its ethical and theological foundations. Furthermore, the study highlights the strategic role of Islamic educational institutions particularly *pesantren* as agents of social cohesion capable of bridging cultural and religious differences through community engagement and intercultural dialogue. However, the findings also indicate that the transformation of Islamic education remains uneven and constrained by challenges such as curricular rigidity, limited teacher competence in multicultural pedagogy and digital literacy, and insufficient institutional support. Overall, this study affirms that transforming Islamic education in multicultural contexts requires a systemic and sustained effort involving curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and visionary educational leadership. When these elements are aligned, Islamic education can cultivate a generation of learners who are firmly rooted in their religious identity while being open, tolerant, and capable of living harmoniously in diverse societies. Such an educational transformation is essential to ensuring the continued relevance of Islamic education in addressing contemporary social challenges and contributing positively to the future of multicultural society.

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