

Islamic Religious Education and Deconstructing Prejudice: Strengthening Religious Moderation and Social Harmony Among Multicultural Students

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Abstract : Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays an important role in fostering religious moderation among multicultural junior high school students. Moderation refers to a balanced religious attitude that avoids extremism, respects diversity, rejects violence, and promotes peaceful coexistence. This is particularly crucial during adolescence, when students are shaping their social and religious identities. Before implementing moderation-based learning, many students viewed religion in a formalistic way, focusing mainly on rituals rather than values like empathy, respect, and responsibility. They often judged peers based on outward differences, highlighting the need for value-oriented religious education. To address this, PAI teachers integrated moderation values into existing topics such as moral teachings, social ethics, and Islamic history. By linking lessons to real-life examples, including the coexistence of diverse communities in Medina, students gained a more practical understanding of religious values. As a result, positive changes emerged: students became more respectful, open to different opinions, more collaborative, and showed reduced conflicts, indicating stronger social harmony..

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, Religious Moderation, Social Harmony

INTRODUCTION

West Nusa Tenggara Province in Indonesia represents a socially and culturally diverse region inhabited by various ethnic groups, including Sasak, Samawa, Mbojo, Balinese, Javanese, Bugis, and other migrant communities. This diversity serves as valuable social capital for fostering collective life, yet it also carries risks of prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and potential conflict if not properly managed through education (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Muhsin et al., 2024). Schools play a strategic role as social spaces where national values, tolerance, and respect for diversity can be instilled from an early age (Hakim & Muhid, 2025; Rosanti et al., 2024).

Within the national education framework, schools function not only as centers of knowledge transfer but also as institutions for shaping democratic and socially responsible citizens. Students must be prepared to live harmoniously in pluralistic societies. In this regard, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) holds a crucial role, as it encompasses not only ritual teachings but also moral values, justice, humanity, and social responsibility (Thaha et al., 2025; Aziz et al., 2024). When implemented progressively, PAI can effectively foster moderation and reduce intergroup prejudice (Pratama et al., 2025; Siregar & Ismaraidha, 2025).

However, in practice, PAI often remains confined to textual and normative approaches. Learning tends to emphasize memorization of religious concepts, jurisprudence, and individual obligations, while neglecting the broader social dimensions of religion. Consequently, students may

perceive religion merely as a formal identity rather than as a set of values promoting mutual respect and coexistence (Zuhdi & Sarwenda, 2020; Siswanto, 2020). In multicultural school environments, such approaches risk reinforcing exclusivist perspectives and widening social gaps among students (Muhajir et al., 2025).

Social prejudice, defined as negative judgments toward individuals or groups without objective understanding, frequently manifests in school settings. It may appear in subtle forms such as ethnic jokes, religious labeling, exclusion of minority peers, or assumptions of superiority. Although seemingly trivial, these behaviors can negatively affect students' psychological well-being, reduce their sense of safety, and disrupt learning processes. If left unaddressed, minor prejudices can escalate into more severe forms of intolerance (Rahmat et al., 2025; Musyarrofi & Rofiq, 2025).

The social dynamics in West Nusa Tenggara are evolving due to increased tourism, urbanization, and internal migration, which intensify intercultural interactions. Schools, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, now host students from increasingly diverse backgrounds. This transformation necessitates an educational paradigm capable of managing diversity constructively (Sibawaihi et al., 2025; Raihani, 2018). Consequently, PAI teachers are expected not only to possess academic competence but also to demonstrate sensitivity toward issues of diversity (Rosanti et al., 2024).

The concept of religious moderation becomes highly relevant in this context. It emphasizes balance, tolerance, non-violence, and commitment to national unity (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). For junior high school students, these values are particularly important, as adolescence represents a critical phase of identity formation. At this stage, students are more susceptible to external influences, including intolerant narratives circulating on social media. Therefore, schools must function as spaces that promote healthy religious literacy (Zuhdi & Sarwenda, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2024).

In fact, Islamic teachings provide a rich foundation for promoting moderation, including principles such as *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human brotherhood), justice, deliberation, mutual recognition among different groups, and the prohibition of degrading others. However, these values have not always been translated into effective pedagogical practices. Many teachers still require innovative learning models that can bridge religious teachings with students' real-life social contexts (Thaha et al., 2025; Hakim & Muhid, 2025).

One promising approach is the deconstruction of prejudice. This approach involves dismantling long-standing negative assumptions and replacing them with more rational and equitable understandings. In the context of PAI, deconstruction can be implemented through critical dialogue, case studies, reflective learning, collaborative activities across diverse groups, and contextual interpretation of religious teachings. Through such methods, students not only learn about tolerance but also actively practice it in their daily interactions (Muhajir et al., 2025; Siregar & Ismaraidha, 2025).

Empirical observations in schools reveal persistent patterns of social segregation based on ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic status. Students often form homogeneous groups, limiting opportunities for meaningful interaction. According to social contact theory, positive and equal interactions between different groups can significantly reduce prejudice. Therefore, PAI teachers can design collaborative learning activities that encourage inclusive and productive engagement among students (Rahmat et al., 2025; Rosanti et al., 2024).

This study is significant because research on the relationship between PAI, social prejudice, and religious moderation in West Nusa Tenggara remains limited, particularly at the junior high school level. Previous studies have generally focused on curriculum design or general tolerance behaviors without specifically examining how PAI contributes to the deconstruction of prejudice in multicultural classrooms. Given the unique social diversity of the region, this topic warrants deeper investigation (Pratama et al., 2025; Aziz et al., 2024).

The study involves three schools located in different contexts to capture diverse student experiences. Schools in Mataram City represent heterogeneous urban environments, those in West Lombok reflect transitional areas with mixed populations, and schools in North Lombok represent developing regions shaped by post-disaster conditions and emerging social mobility. These varied contexts enable a more comprehensive analysis of the issue (Raihani, 2018; Sibawaihi et al., 2025).

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of multicultural Islamic education and peace-oriented pedagogy. Practically, its findings can inform teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in designing educational strategies that promote social harmony. Amid increasing social polarization, schools must serve as strongholds of unity and mutual respect (Musyarrofi & Rofiq, 2025; Muhsin et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the role of PAI in deconstructing prejudice, the strategies employed by teachers to strengthen religious moderation, and their impact on fostering social harmony among multicultural students in West Nusa Tenggara.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. This approach was chosen because it is able to understand in depth the learning practices of PAI and the social dynamics of students in the real context of the school. The research locations include State Junior High School/SMPN 5 Mataram City, State Junior High School/SMPN 7 West Lombok Regency, and State Junior High School/SMPN 5 North Lombok Regency. The three schools were chosen purposively because they have diverse student compositions in terms of ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic background.

The research subjects consisted of PAI teachers, principals, homeroom teachers, students in grades VIII and IX, and several parents of students as supporting informants. Data collection techniques are carried out through participatory observation in the learning process, in-depth interviews, documentation studies on teaching tools and school rules, and focus group discussions with students. Observations were focused on classroom interactions, communication patterns, and teachers' strategies in managing diversity.

The data was analyzed using an interactive model through data reduction, data presentation, and a conclusion was drawn. The validity of the findings is maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. The study lasted for four months which allowed researchers to understand the school culture more completely. The main indicators studied include the form of student prejudice, PAI learning strategies, the implementation of religious moderation, and changes in social relations between students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Social Prejudice in the School Environment

Social prejudice is still found in students' daily interactions, although the intensity varies from school to school. These prejudices generally do not arise in the form of open conflict, but through symbolic behavior, jokes, labeling, and social groupings that are considered reasonable by students. In many cases, students are unaware that their actions include subtle discrimination that can affect the psychology of their peers.

The most dominant form of prejudice is ethnic jokes. Some students use certain terms that refer to stereotypes of ethnic groups, such as thinking that certain groups are hard, slow to learn, too dominant, or funny to be used as ridicule. This joke often occurs during break hours, sports activities, or informal conversations in class. Although some students consider it to be ordinary humor, interviews show that students who are the target of jokes feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, and even reluctant to interact further. This indicates that identity-based humor can be the entrance to the birth of social exclusion.

In addition to ethnic jokes, the study also found academic stereotypes. Some students believe that certain groups are smarter in certain subjects, while other groups are considered less capable. This kind of perception encourages bias in group work. Students who are considered smart are more often chosen to be group leaders, while students from certain backgrounds tend to be placed in passive positions. In the long run, such situations can lower student confidence and reinforce inequality of participation in the classroom.

Another form of prejudice that is quite prominent is the exclusivity of friendships. In all three schools, students tend to form groups based on their proximity to their regional origin, mother tongue, living environment, or similar economic status of their families. This phenomenon is most noticeable in new students who are still looking for a sense of social security. They are more comfortable hanging out with friends who are considered "the same" than opening relationships across groups. As a result, interaction between students becomes limited and the opportunity to get to know other groups positively is getting smaller. In social contact theory, the lack of cross-group interaction can reinforce prejudice because perceptions are built not from real experience, but from one-sided assumptions and stories.

The study also found religious labels on a light scale, for example treating students who are diligent in worship as too serious, or conversely treating students who are less active in religious activities as undesirable. Although it occurs in a smaller percentage than ethnic prejudice, this kind of label is still important to pay attention to because it relates to sensitive personal identity. If left unmanaged, religious labeling can develop into a judgmental attitude and reduce students' psychological security at school.

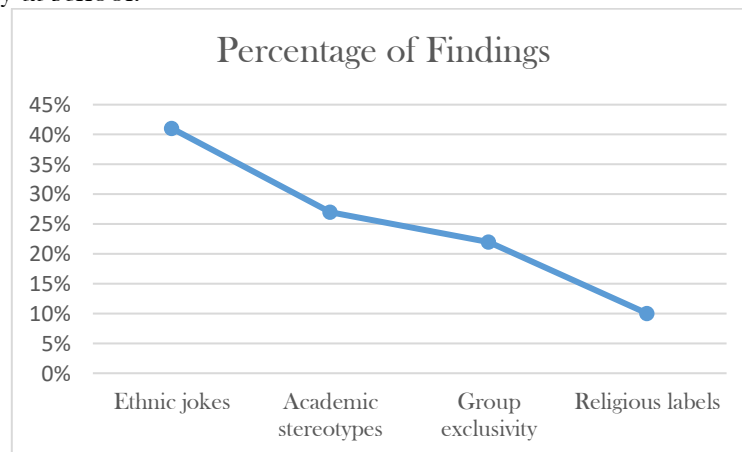


Figure 1. Distribution of forms of social prejudice

The data in Figure 1 shows that prejudice emerges most through colloquial language. That is, the main problem is not just open hatred, but the normalization of verbal behavior that degrades other groups. Because it is often wrapped in humor, this action is rarely reported to teachers. Even though the impact is quite serious, especially for students who are sensitive or have a minority position in the class.

In terms of school location, SMPN 5 Mataram City shows a more complex variety of prejudices because the composition of students is more heterogeneous. The interaction between students from different backgrounds is so intense that the chances of friction are greater. However, this school also has a better chance of building tolerance because students are used to meeting differences. At SMPN 7 West Lombok Regency, prejudice is more in the form of social grouping based on the area of residence. Meanwhile, at SMPN 5 North Lombok Regency, stereotypes are more influenced by family relationships and the environment of the surrounding community.

Interviews with teachers show that some of the prejudice is brought by students from home, social media, or adult conversations in the neighborhood. Students often repeat terms they hear

without understanding their meaning and impact. This shows that schools cannot work alone, as the formation of social attitudes is also influenced by the family and community ecosystems.

These findings underscore the importance of systematic educational interventions. Prejudices in early adolescence are still fluid and can be changed through positive social experiences. If schools allow identity jokes, group segregation, and academic stereotypes to continue, then prejudice will be considered normal. On the other hand, if teachers actively build a culture of mutual respect, provide space for cross-group cooperation, and reprimand discriminatory behavior, then schools can be an effective space to foster social harmony. It is in this context that Islamic Religious Education has an important role as a medium for internalizing the values of brotherhood, justice, and respect for human dignity.

Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Strategies in Deconstructing Prejudice

Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) has a central position in efforts to deconstruct social prejudices in the multicultural school environment. In the three schools that are the location of the research, PAI teachers not only play the role of delivering religious materials, but also as facilitators of the formation of healthy social relations between students. Through proper learning, teachers are able to turn the classroom into an arena for dialogue, cooperation, and internalization of the value of tolerance. These findings confirm that the deconstruction of prejudice does not occur spontaneously, but rather requires a conscious, planned, and sustainable pedagogic strategy.

One of the main strategies implemented by teachers is mixed group discussions. Teachers deliberately organize study groups consisting of students with different backgrounds, both in terms of ethnicity, academic ability, and social association. The goal is for students to get used to interacting with friends they rarely approached before. In the discussion process, the teacher gave themes such as brotherhood in Islam, the manners of making friends, the importance of respecting differences, and the prohibition of demeaning others. Through these interactions, students begin to get to know the character of friends personally, so that the stereotypes that were previously attached slowly decrease.

At SMPN 5 Mataram City, for example, PAI teachers combine students from various social groups in a presentation assignment on noble moral values. The results of observations showed that students who were initially awkward became more open after working together. They began to realize that differences in regional origin did not affect the ability to work together. Mixed group discussions are the most effective strategy because they create a hands-on experience that challenges old prejudices.

The second strategy is the use of social case studies. Teachers present examples of social conflicts, bullying, or discrimination that have occurred in society and the school environment. Students are then asked to analyze the causes of the problem, the impact caused, and solutions based on Islamic values. This approach makes learning more contextual because students not only memorize theories, but learn to read social realities critically. They understand that prejudice can develop into a real conflict if it is not prevented in the first place. At SMPN 7 West Lombok Regency, teachers used a case of ridicule between friends that led to a small fight. From these cases, students were asked to relate to Islamic teachings about maintaining oral and brotherhood. The results of the discussion showed that students are more likely to receive moral messages when they are associated with concrete experiences that are close to their lives.

The next strategy is reflective lectures. In contrast to the conventional lecture method which is one-way, reflective lectures are carried out by inviting students to reflect on personal experiences. The teacher asks questions such as: "How would you feel if you were ridiculed because of your regional origin?" or "What happens if everyone is just friends with their own group?" These kinds of questions encourage empathy and moral awareness in students. They learn to put themselves in the shoes of others, so they are more careful in their actions. At SMPN 5 North Lombok Regency, PAI teachers began the lesson with the story of the Prophet Muhammad SAW who respected various community

groups. After that, students were asked to write down their experiences when they were hurt or hurt a friend. This simple activity has proven to be effective in building a more humane and open classroom atmosphere.

The fourth strategy is a shared social project. Teachers involve students in mutual cooperation activities, social services, fundraising, or school cleaning programs across groups. This collaborative activity is important because prejudice often collapses when individuals have a common goal. In social activities, group identity becomes less dominant because students focus on common achievements. They learned that cooperation is more important than differences in background.

The intensity of use was categorized based on the frequency of application of the strategy by PAI teachers during the study observation. The high category indicates the strategy is used regularly in weekly learning, while the medium category indicates the strategy is applied at a specific moment according to the material needs or class conditions.

The research also found that the success of teachers' strategies is greatly influenced by personal examples. Teachers who are fair, do not discriminate against students, and use polite language are more respected by students. On the other hand, if the teacher himself shows bias or favoritism, then the message of tolerance becomes less effective. Thus, the deconstruction of prejudice is not enough through teaching methods, but also through real examples in the teacher's daily behavior.

Overall, the PAI teachers' strategy has been proven to be able to reduce social distance between students and increase positive interactions in the school environment. Students who were previously exclusive began to be willing to cooperate, while demeaning jokes began to decrease after the teacher gave repeated explanations. These findings confirm that PAI has great potential as an instrument of social transformation if taught with an inclusive, dialogical, and student-oriented approach.

Strengthening Religious Moderation

Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) plays a significant role in strengthening religious moderation among multicultural junior high school students. In this context, moderation refers to a balanced religious attitude that avoids extremism, respects diversity, rejects violence, and promotes peaceful coexistence within a national framework. These values are especially important at the adolescent stage, when students are actively forming their social and religious identities.

Before the implementation of moderation-based learning, many students demonstrated a formalistic understanding of religion. They tended to view religion mainly as a set of ritual obligations, with less emphasis on social values such as empathy, respect, and responsibility. Some students were quick to judge peers based on outward expressions like dress, worship practices, or lifestyle, indicating a need for deeper value-oriented religious education. PAI teachers addressed this by integrating moderation values into existing curriculum topics, such as moral teachings, social ethics, and Islamic history. Rather than treating moderation as a separate subject, teachers connected it to real-life examples, including the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities in Medina. This approach helped students better understand the practical application of religious values.

In practice, positive changes were observed across schools. At SMPN 5 Mataram, students became more respectful during discussions and more willing to listen to differing opinions. At SMPN 7 West Lombok, collaborative projects encouraged interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, fostering openness and mutual understanding. Meanwhile, at SMPN 5 North Lombok, there was a noticeable decline in verbal conflicts and stereotype-based jokes, as students became more aware of respectful communication. These outcomes demonstrate that PAI can effectively promote inclusive attitudes and strengthen social harmony among students.

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) to reduce prejudice and promote religious moderation has made progress, but it still faces major structural, cultural, and pedagogical challenges. Its success depends not only on teachers but also on support from schools, families, and educational policies. Without strong systemic support, efforts to build lasting social harmony remain

limited. A key challenge is the lack of contextual teaching materials. Most teachers rely on standard textbooks focused on faith, worship, and morality, with limited content on diversity, conflict resolution, and moderation. As a result, teachers must create their own materials, which is difficult due to limited time and resources. In diverse classrooms, such as those in SMPN 5 Mataram, this makes tolerance education dependent on teacher creativity.

Another challenge is the influence of family and social environments. Students often bring stereotypes shaped by family and social media, which can contradict school values. Cases in SMPN 7 West Lombok show that student conflicts may stem from inherited social biases, indicating the need for collaboration beyond schools. Limited teacher training is also a barrier. Many teachers lack skills in inclusive pedagogy and conflict mediation, as training often focuses on administration rather than practice. Additionally, limited instructional time restricts deep discussions, even though developing tolerant attitudes requires continuous and consistent learning.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that Islamic Religious Education has a strategic role in deconstructing social prejudices among multicultural students in West Nusa Tenggara Province. Through dialogical, contextual learning and emphasizing universal human values, PAI is able to change students' negative perceptions of other groups. These findings confirm that religious education should not be limited to ritual aspects, but also directed as a means of building social character.

Religious moderation has been proven to be strengthened when teachers provide an equal and collaborative space for interaction. Students who previously tended to be exclusive began to be open to cooperation, respect differences, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Schools with inclusive cultures and teacher examples show better results than schools that still place diversity as a fringe issue.

In the future, the reorientation of the PAI curriculum needs to be carried out by including anti-prejudice materials, multicultural literacy, and peace pedagogy. Local governments, school principals, and teachers need to work together to provide training, teaching materials, and cross-cultural programs on an ongoing basis. With this step, PAI can be an important foundation in building a generation of NTB that is religious, moderate, and able to maintain social harmony in a pluralistic society.

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