

Transformational Leadership Strategy of School Principals in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Islamic Religious Education Learning in Junior High School

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Abstract:

Strengthening the value of religious moderation in schools is important to be done early to prevent extreme and intolerant ideologies. The principal has a strategic role in fostering a school culture that is inclusive, tolerant, and respects diversity. This study aims to describe the principal's transformational leadership strategy in strengthening religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study method at SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia Rancaekek Bandung. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles & Huberman interactive model. The results showed that the principal implemented transformational leadership through: (1) exemplary behavior in tolerance and inclusive behavior; (2) inspirational motivation through coaching and counseling on the value of moderation; (3) intellectual stimulation by encouraging teachers and students to think critically and reflectively regarding religious issues; (4) individual consideration with guidance according to the needs of teachers and students; and (5) implementation of moderation-based PAI learning through discussions, case studies, and integration of national values. Obstacles such as teacher resistance, limited resources, and differences in student backgrounds were overcome through training, effective communication, and collaboration. In conclusion, the principal's transformational leadership was effective in internalizing the value of religious moderation in schools through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, thus contributing to the formation of an inclusive, tolerant, and diversity-respecting school culture.

Keywords: Islamic religious education; junior high school; principal; religious moderation; transformational leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping students' character into individuals with noble character, tolerance, and religiousness. Schools, as educational institutions, serve not only as a place to transfer knowledge but also as an arena for the socialization of moral, ethical, and spiritual values for the younger generation. Character building through PAI is crucial for preparing students to become

responsible members of society and understand the diversity of their surroundings. However, in practice, the world of education faces serious challenges related to the rise of intolerance and radicalism among adolescents. This phenomenon demonstrates a gap between the goals of character education and the reality on the ground, where some schools, which should be safe and inclusive learning spaces, instead face the threat of extreme ideologies that have the potential to disrupt students' character development. Various studies have shown that Islamic Religious Education teachers play a central role in fostering tolerant and moderate attitudes in students. PAI teachers act as agents of moderation through learning that instills values of tolerance (Sunariyah & Mawardi, 2025). Similarly, Ningsih (2023) emphasizes the importance of implementing contextual learning methods that can foster mutual respect for differences among students. This method enables students to understand diversity not only theoretically but also through real-life experiences in daily interactions at school. In other words, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning innovations are an important instrument for strengthening students' awareness of the values of religious moderation. However, most previous research has focused on the pedagogical aspects of teachers. The impact of school leadership, particularly the principal, on the formation of a culture of moderation and tolerant character remains underexplored. The principal, as the highest leader in the educational unit, holds a strategic position to influence all school dynamics, including the orientation of religious and ethical values (Windayani et al., 2024).

The principal's leadership role extends beyond administrative or managerial roles, encompassing the ability to motivate, stimulate critical thinking, and provide a role model for teachers and students in fostering a school culture that is inclusive, tolerant, and adaptive to diversity. In this context, transformational leadership is a relevant concept to apply. According to Bass, transformational leadership has four main dimensions: exemplary or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These four dimensions are highly relevant to the needs of contemporary education, where principals are recognized not only as administrative managers but also as agents of change capable of building a school culture based on moderation. The principal's exemplary behavior, for example, can provide concrete examples for teachers and students in upholding the values of tolerance; inspirational motivation can foster a collective spirit to maintain harmony; intellectual stimulation encourages teachers and students to think critically about social and religious issues; and individualized consideration addresses the unique needs and characteristics of each individual within the school environment (Bass, 1994). The application of transformational leadership in a school context also requires principals to be able to identify the unique potential and challenges that exist in each educational unit. Principals must be able to formulate strategies that are not only general but also adaptive to the characteristics of teachers, students, and the socio-cultural environment surrounding the school. For example, in schools with students from diverse social and religious backgrounds, principals need to create programs and policies that emphasize respect for differences while minimizing conflict caused by ignorance or stereotypes. This can be done through regular coaching, teacher training, and collaboration with parents and the local community to build a shared understanding of the values of moderation (Widya Agustina et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership enables principals to facilitate innovations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning that emphasize critical reflection and open dialogue. Islamic Religious Education teachers, with the principal's guidance, can design learning activities that present diverse perspectives, encouraging students to critically and morally connect religious teachings with contemporary issues. The principal acts as a catalyst, ensuring that every pedagogical innovation aligns with the vision of moderation and the formation of tolerant character. This approach not only strengthens academic competence but also shapes students' capacity to become conscious, ethical citizens capable of interacting harmoniously in a pluralistic society. Furthermore, transformational leadership emphasizes effective and transparent communication between the principal, teachers, students, and other stakeholders. Through open communication, the principal can build trust, foster intrinsic motivation, and create a school climate conducive to the development of values of tolerance. Consistently applied individualized consideration allows teachers and students to feel valued and supported according to their needs, thus better prepared to actively participate in religious moderation programs. Thus, the implementation of transformational leadership not only has an impact on improving the quality of learning, but also forms a school culture that is inclusive, responsive to diversity, and responsive to contemporary social dynamics.

The urgency of this research is heightened by the rise in cases of intolerance and radicalism among adolescents. Data from various educational institutions and research shows that radicalization occurs not only

outside of school but also penetrates the formal educational environment. This is a crucial concern, as schools should serve as a bulwark against the influence of extremism and as a venue for fostering moderate attitudes in students. Therefore, school principals need to develop leadership strategies that ensure the effective absorption of religious moderation values through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. The role of the principal is thus central, as they are able to integrate teachers' pedagogical innovations with an inclusive and tolerant school culture. Beyond leadership aspects, this research is also relevant in the national context that encourages religious moderation. The government, through various policies, emphasizes the importance of schools as inclusive spaces that foster values of tolerance and diversity. This emphasizes that principal leadership is not only related to internal management but also encompasses social and moral responsibility in shaping a generation aware of the importance of religious moderation. In other words, principals hold a strategic position as social actors who play a role in instilling values of tolerance, both through school policies and through the learning carried out by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers.

Previous research has largely discussed innovations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning and the role of teachers in fostering moderate attitudes. However, few studies have specifically highlighted how principals with transformational leadership styles can strengthen religious moderation in the school environment. Principals have the capacity to create a school environment that supports values-based learning, builds a culture of tolerance, and actively encourages teachers and students to internalize the values of moderation. By placing principals as the focus of this research, this study offers a new perspective in the study of Islamic educational leadership, particularly regarding the development of a tolerant, adaptive, and ethical school culture. Based on the above description, this study aims to describe and analyze the principals' transformational leadership strategies in strengthening religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. The research was conducted at SMPN 4 Limbangan, Garut Regency, and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia, Rancaekek, Bandung Regency. The findings from each educational unit are expected to provide an empirical picture of the effectiveness of transformational leadership in building schools based on moderation, tolerance, ethics, and national character. Thus, this study not only provides academic contributions but also practical recommendations for developing the leadership qualities of school principals and innovations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning that support the formation of moderate and tolerant student character. This background emphasizes three important points: first, the urgency of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as a means of character building and religious moderation; second, the real challenges related to intolerance and radicalism among adolescents; and third, the relevance of the principal's transformational leadership as an effective strategy for strengthening the value of religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. By focusing on transformational leadership, this study is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of adaptive, inclusive, and proactive Islamic education in facing contemporary social dynamics.

Studies on the transformational leadership of school principals in the context of Islamic education have continued to develop in recent years, particularly with the increasing urgency of strengthening religious moderation in schools. Various studies have been conducted to understand how educational leaders play a role in shaping a school culture that is tolerant, inclusive, and adaptive to diversity. The main focus of previous research has been on the role of principals as agents of change, not only managing administration but also motivating, inspiring, and creating a learning ecosystem aligned with the values of moderation. Specifically, research on transformational leadership strategies in strengthening Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning has shown that the success of religious education does not depend solely on teachers but is largely determined by the principal's vision and leadership style. Principals who implement transformational leadership have been shown to integrate religious values, tolerance, and national ethics into all educational policies and practices. Against this backdrop, it is important to critically review the findings of previous research as an academic foundation for analyzing principals' transformational leadership strategies in strengthening religious moderation through PAI learning at the junior high school level.

First, research conducted by Ronny Irwanto and Tumiran (2025) on "Improving the Performance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers at Panca Budi Medan Middle School." This research shows that the principal implemented motivation-based strategies, continuous supervision, and collaboration between school components within a transformational leadership framework. This approach was used to build a quality PAI learning environment that aligns with the direction of the Independent Curriculum policy. The principal acts as a visionary leader who not only encourages the improvement of teacher professionalism but also actively strengthens the school's religious identity. Through systematic program planning and the collective

involvement of all school members, this effort is able to strengthen the Islamic character of students and increase their participation in religious activities in a structured and collaborative manner (Irwanto & Tumiran, 2022).

Second, research conducted by Nur Mahfud Efendi, Choirul Anam, Ahmad Zainudin, and Tamrin Fathoni (2024) on "The Role of School Principals in Developing Religious Moderation in School Environments." This research emphasizes that school principals play a key role in building an inclusive, tolerant, and diversity-respecting school environment. Principals with strong leadership skills and a deep understanding of religious moderation are able to mobilize teachers and students and open up spaces for interfaith dialogue. Strategies implemented include providing professional training for teachers, developing extracurricular activities that support values of tolerance, and strengthening collaboration with parents and the surrounding community. Various obstacles, such as resistance from some parties and limited resources, are overcome through the implementation of adaptive and responsive policies to field conditions (Efendi et al., 2024).

Third, research conducted by Rohmah Yuliana, Dwi Sulisworo, and Enung Hasanah (2025) on "Transformational Leadership of the Principal at Muhammadiyah Semin Middle School." This research examines the application of transformational leadership by the principal at Muhammadiyah Semin Middle School, which successfully revitalized the school's image from a less desirable condition to an educational institution that once again has a positive reputation. Through visionary, creative, and adaptive leadership, the principal encouraged change by providing continuous motivation to teachers, conducting constructive supervision, and building solid cooperation. This strategy contributed directly to improving the quality of learning, including in Islamic Religious Education subjects. This leadership model has also proven effective in strengthening the internalization of the values of religious moderation through the development of students' complete character, both in moral, spiritual, and social aspects (Yuliana et al., 2025).

Fourth, research conducted by Zulfahmi, Nurmalina, and Imam Hanafi (2024) on "The Influence of Principals' Transformational Leadership Styles on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Elementary Schools." This research examines the impact of principals' transformational leadership styles on teacher motivation and performance, particularly in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education learning. Principals with transformational characters are able to build an innovative, adaptive, and collaborative school culture, thereby increasing teachers' commitment to instilling the values of religious moderation in the learning process. This leadership not only inspires teachers to be more creative and reflective, but also encourages them to continue to develop their professionalism sustainably in delivering Islamic Religious Education material in a moderate, peaceful, and tolerant manner. This model has proven effective in strengthening the quality of learning based on religious values that are relevant to the needs of the times (Zulfahmi et al., 2024).

Based on the findings from these various studies, it can be concluded that the transformational leadership of school principals plays a strategic role in building a school culture that supports religious moderation, both through strengthening teacher professionalism and through innovations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Each study emphasizes the importance of principals as agents of change who not only manage administration but also inspire, motivate, and guide teachers and students to create an inclusive and tolerant school environment. Principals act as visionary figures capable of integrating the values of religious moderation into the curriculum and extracurricular activities, thereby making Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning more relevant, contextual, and impacting students' overall character. These findings also emphasize that transformational leadership strategies are not singular but multidimensional, encompassing inspirational motivation, role modeling, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. The implementation of these strategies results in a collaborative learning ecosystem in which teachers are motivated to continually improve their professionalism, while students gain learning experiences that foster tolerance and understanding of diversity. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that transformational leadership can transform a school's image and enhance its reputation, both through improving teacher quality and the quality of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Schools become innovative, creative environments capable of responding to contemporary social dynamics, including the challenges of intolerance and radicalism. Thus, principals are not only administrative managers but also social actors who build collective awareness about the importance of religious moderation. These findings provide a strong foundation for this study to further examine how principals' transformational leadership strategies can be effectively implemented to strengthen religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at SMPN 4 Limbangan and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia Rancaekek. This research is expected to provide an empirical overview and significant academic

contribution to the development of Islamic educational leadership studies, while also providing practical recommendations for principals, teachers, and stakeholders in creating tolerant, inclusive, and Islamic-characterized schools.

METHOD

This research applies a naturalistic qualitative approach with a case study design. Creswell explains that qualitative research is an approach to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups attach to a social or humanitarian issue. The research process involves formulating questions and procedures, collecting data directly from participants, conducting inductive data analysis from specific findings to more general themes, and interpreting the meaning of the data obtained. Qualitative research reports are flexible, and researchers use an inductive perspective that emphasizes subjective meaning and the complexity of the phenomena studied (Creswell, 2019). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the principal's transformational leadership strategy in strengthening the values of religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. The use of a case study design is considered most appropriate because it allows researchers to explore the phenomenon of leadership and social interaction contextually and naturally. The research focused on two educational institutions: SMPN 4 Limbangan, Garut Regency, and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia Rancaekek, Bandung Regency. Research subjects included the principal, PAI teachers, the vice principal for curriculum, students, and community leaders or school committee members. The selection of participants used a purposive sampling technique, namely considering their direct involvement in the implementation of transformational leadership and the practice of strengthening the value of religious moderation in schools.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation, and literature review. Interviews were used to explore the principal's leadership strategies and stakeholders' responses to the implementation of religious tolerance and moderation values in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Observations were conducted on the principal's activities, classroom learning processes, and school activities related to the values of inclusivity, justice, interfaith harmony, and tolerance practices. Documentation was conducted through document reviews such as the School Work Plan (RKS), Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), religious activity reports, and school policies related to religious moderation. Meanwhile, literature review was used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and research concepts (Harianto & Abdurrahman, 2025). Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing important information, data presentation was carried out in the form of a structured narrative, while conclusions were drawn reflectively based on the patterns of meaning found. To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, the study used source triangulation, technical triangulation, and time triangulation techniques. This approach ensures that the data obtained has a high level of validity and can be scientifically accounted for. Thus, this study is expected to provide an authentic and in-depth understanding of the role of transformational leadership of school principals in strengthening religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education learning in junior high schools (Miles et al., 2019).

The researchers also upheld ethical research principles by ensuring that each participant voluntarily participated through informed consent and were guaranteed the confidentiality of their identities and the data they provided. The entire interview and observation process was conducted with consideration of the school's social and cultural norms to avoid disrupting learning activities. The researchers established a communicative and collaborative relationship with the school to create a natural research environment, ensuring that the data obtained truly reflected the reality on the ground. This approach enabled the researchers to capture the dynamics of the principal's leadership not only from a formal perspective, but also from a relational and cultural perspective. The principal's transformational leadership strategy was analyzed within a framework of four main dimensions: inspiration, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention. Each of these components was explored to determine its effectiveness in encouraging Islamic Religious Education teachers to consistently integrate the value of religious moderation into their learning. The researchers also examined how school policies, organizational culture, and support from parents and the community contributed to the effectiveness of strengthening the value of religious moderation. Thus, this study not only describes leadership practices but also uncovers supporting and inhibiting factors in the process of their implementation in schools (Sibarani & Albina, 2025).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Idealized Influence

The idealized influence dimension is strongly evident in the leadership of the principals at SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia. The principals not only affirm a vision and mission that supports religious moderation but also consistently exemplify it in their behavior. The values of tolerance, justice, and rejection of extremism are embodied in daily interactions with students, teachers, and the school community. This is evident in the fair treatment of all students regardless of religious background, economic status, or academic ability. Furthermore, teachers are directed to create an inclusive and dialogical classroom climate, so that students feel valued and free to express their opinions openly. This exemplary model builds trust and establishes the principal as an influential moral figure in strengthening a culture of moderation within the school environment. Justice is a principle applied in every aspect, both learning and assessment, encompassing both academic and non-academic domains. Meanwhile, an anti-extremist attitude is instilled through religious activities, such as Rohis (Islamic spiritual group), congregational prayer, Quran recitation, and commemoration of Islamic holidays. These activities are not merely formal or ceremonial, but also emphasize religious moderation, critical thinking skills regarding hoaxes, and respect for differences. Interestingly, the term "religious moderation" is not always mentioned directly, but its spirit is strongly felt in school culture and daily interactions. In this way, the exemplary behavior of principals and teachers is not merely managerial but also serves as a bulwark of values that foster an inclusive culture and harmonious social interactions.

The inclusive culture at both schools is developing in real terms, not just as a slogan. The principals emphasize equality in various forums and then translate this into policies that are directly felt by the school community. All students have equal opportunities to participate in academic and extracurricular activities without discrimination. Teachers play an active role in forming heterogeneous study groups, mediating conflicts, and providing emotional support to students who tend to be introverted. Inclusive values are also creatively integrated into learning, for example through stories of the Prophet's companions, such as Bilal ibn Rabah and Salman Al-Farisi, who teach the power of diversity and justice. These stories serve as a medium for students to reflect that differences are strengths, not obstacles. Interactions between students reflect habits of mutual respect, cooperation, and deliberation. Communication programs with parents, classroom evaluations, and community service activities further strengthen the inclusive atmosphere. The combination of exemplary leadership, policies that favor justice, and a pedagogical approach that respects diversity make inclusive values truly the "breath" of school life. Both schools have successfully harmoniously combined the values of Pancasila with moderate Islamic teachings. The values of social justice, mutual cooperation, unity, and love of the homeland are in line with the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin*. Islamic education teachers creatively connect the concept of nationality with religious values, for example, emphasizing that Islamic brotherhood is in line with *huqqu al-waṭan*. Love for one's country is part of faith. Thematic learning, creative projects, and educational drama provide students with a means of expressing tolerance, peace, and nationalism. Ramadhan and other religious activities at the Islamic Boarding School emphasize not only spirituality but also the socio-national dimension, enabling students to understand that religiosity and national spirit complement each other.

The integration of Pancasila and moderate Islamic values has a positive impact on student development. Cognitively, they better understand the concept of moderation; affectively, they are open and respectful of differences; and psychomotorically, they are active in social and national activities. Both schools play a strategic role in shaping a generation that is religious, nationalistic, inclusive, and contributive to society (Abdul Azis, 2024). A humble attitude, openness to differences, and the ability to embrace all school members make the principals direct role models in implementing polite, dialogical, and calming Islamic values. Teachers, students, and parents acknowledge the more inclusive and conducive learning environment for the development of moderate character. This practice aligns with QS. al-Ahzab [33]:21, which affirms the Prophet Muhammad as a good role model, as well as the hadith narrated by Imam Ahmad that emphasizes the Prophet's mission to perfect noble character. Principals who instill Islamic values through personal example are consistent with Qur'anic and prophetic principles. The principal's exemplary behavior also aligns with al-Farabi's concept of *al-insan al-fadhil*, a leader who guides with reason, morals, and wisdom, as well as Ki Hajar Dewantara's motto: "*ing ngarso sung tulodho*" (in front, giving example). In leadership theory, this aligns with the idealized influence dimension of transformational

leadership (Bass, 1994) where leaders serve as moral role models, inspiring their subordinates, rather than simply ordering them. Transformational leaders influence through respect and trust, not merely instruction. The principal's exemplary behavior also supports the implementation of Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation Number 40 of 2021 concerning the Pancasila Student Profile, as well as the 2020–2024 Roadmap for Religious Moderation. By effectively executing these policies, the principal demonstrates synergy between normative, theoretical, and practical foundations. Thus, the principal's exemplary behavior serves as a moral, spiritual, and structural foundation that strengthens the transformation of religious education toward moderation, peace, and context. Exemplary behavior is not just an instrument of leadership, but rather a driving force for change in school culture that is received by teachers, students, and parents (Pribadi et al., 2025).

Inspirational Motivation

The inspirational motivation dimension is very prominent in the leadership practices of the principals at SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia Rancaekek. The principals not only act as administrators and curriculum managers, but also as driving forces who inspire teachers, particularly in strengthening the value of religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. They present a clear and easily understood vision and provide concrete support for a learning model that is peaceful, collaborative, and contextualized to students' lives. Another key strength is their consistency in voicing their vision of religious moderation on various occasions, not only in formal forums such as meetings or roll calls, but also in everyday informal conversations. Every administrative instruction is almost always accompanied by a reinforcement of moral values in the form of an invitation to cultivate an attitude of tolerance, empathy, and justice in social interactions. These messages are delivered communicatively with a down-to-earth style, often reinforced by exemplary stories from Islamic and national figures such as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), KH Hasyim Asy'ari, KH Ahmad Dahlan, Gus Dur, and Buya Hamka (Ramdani et al., 2025). Through this approach, teachers feel valued and motivated to contribute to realizing the school's moderate and religious vision. This inspiring motivation has direct implications for the formation of a harmonious, participatory school culture oriented toward strengthening tolerant character.

In this way, the message of moderation is more easily understood and truly imprinted on both teachers and students. In addition to face-to-face communication, digital media is effectively utilized. The principal uses a teacher WhatsApp group to share inspirational quotes, motivational videos, and reflective notes that spark discussion. This strategy creates a dialogic atmosphere while strengthening the internalization of moderation values among educators. In the classroom, teachers convey this vision by beginning lessons with moral messages relevant to students' lives, opening spaces for healthy discussion, and emphasizing diversity as a national treasure. This consistency has had a positive impact: students become more confident in discussions, more comfortable expressing their views, and a variety of creative works have emerged, from poems to articles on the theme of peace and togetherness. Analysis of school documents, such as student bulletins, annual agendas, and religious programs, shows that moderation values have become part of the daily culture, both in large events and in simple activities like group prayer or class discussions. The principal also provides concrete support to teachers to develop peaceful, contextual, and moderation-oriented learning. This support includes training, spaces for dialogue between teachers, and encouragement to link Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning to current social issues. Teachers are encouraged to use creative approaches, such as linking teaching materials to societal diversity or relevant social events. This way, students gain not only knowledge but also the skills to navigate differences wisely. Moderation is not just jargon, but the very essence of the learning process.

A collaborative culture also thrives. Cross-subject projects address issues of diversity, tolerance, and brotherhood. For example, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers collaborate with Social Studies, Indonesian Language, and Arts and Culture teachers to develop integrative learning. Students write peace-themed short stories, perform reflective poetry, or discuss national values from an Islamic historical perspective. Strategic programs such as "Inspiring Teachers" strengthen synergy among teachers, enabling shared experiences and reflective dialogue. Even informal interactions, such as discussions in the teachers' lounge or gatherings after congregational prayers, foster a sense of community. Despite challenges such as differing teaching styles, difficulties in coordinating schedules, and initial resistance from some teachers, transformational leadership overcomes these challenges. Teachers become more open to sharing teaching resources, developing joint plans, and collaborating on extracurricular activities that instill the value of

moderation. The principal's inspiring motivation not only brings to life the vision of religious moderation but also fosters a collaborative work culture that enriches students' learning experiences. This collective spirit serves as a crucial foundation for creating learning that is moderate, inclusive, and relevant to a diverse society. Teachers are motivated not by structural pressures, but through narrative inspiration and the principal's personal attention to national and religious issues. The principal consistently conveys idealistic messages that foster teachers' enthusiasm for developing dialogic learning, open-minded thinking, and instilling Islamic values relevant to students' social realities. This approach aligns with the educational methods of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who not only conveyed revelations but also fostered optimism and moral responsibility in his companions. The hadith narrated by Muslim, "Bring good news and do not cause people to flee," serves as the principal's spiritual foundation for inspiring teachers to ensure that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is welcoming, not intimidating.

Paulo Freire's idea of education as a process of liberation is also relevant. The principal acts as a facilitator of transformation, freeing teachers from fear and dogmatism, and encouraging reflection, creativity, and innovation in teaching. Religious education is not simply a transfer of doctrine, but a process of dialogue that fosters critical awareness (Duryat & Alphan, 2021). Transformational leadership emphasizes the importance of collective vision and the emotional involvement of subordinates (Bass, 1994). The principal successfully instills an awareness that religious education is not only a curricular obligation but also a moral responsibility. There is a positive correlation between the principal's inspirational motivation and the readiness of Islamic Religious Education teachers to integrate the values of tolerance and diversity. This strategy aligns with the 2020–2024 Roadmap for Religious Moderation, which emphasizes strengthening tolerance through a humanist-transformative approach. This vision is also integrated with the Pancasila Student Profile, emphasizing the formation of religious, inclusive, and national-minded character. Thus, the principal's inspirational motivation fosters a participatory, values-based, and progressive Islamic Religious Education learning culture. Leadership is no longer merely a structural function, but has become a driving force for change towards education that is humanistic, moderate, and relevant to Indonesia's social dynamics.

Intellectual Stimulation

The principal plays an active role in encouraging Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to think critically, be open to new perspectives, and be creative in responding to contemporary religious issues. This effort is realized through creating discussion spaces, encouraging exploration of learning methods, and giving teachers the freedom to adapt teaching materials to the social context and students' needs. As a result, teachers feel more confident in testing old assumptions, developing creative methods, and integrating the value of moderation into every learning process. This intellectual stimulation aligns with Islamic teachings, which encourage the use of reason and the development of knowledge (*yatafakkarun*, *yatadabbarun*). QS. Az-Zumar: 9 emphasizes the superiority of those with knowledge over those without, thus encouraging teachers to think reflectively and critically and maintain a moderate attitude. Sharpening reasoning becomes part of worship, not merely an academic activity. This approach also aligns with the thinking of John Dewey, who views education as a process of reconstructing experience through critical reflection. Teachers are not only curriculum implementers but also active subjects who design contextual and creative learning. This view resonates with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who emphasized the importance of etiquette and critical awareness in pursuing knowledge so that knowledge brings benefits, not just technical skills (Samsudin, 2024). Transformational leadership (Bass, 1994), emphasizes that intellectual stimulation encourages innovation, creativity, and analytical skills in subordinates. The principal's practice of inviting teachers to review moderate literature, challenge old concepts, and design dialogic learning aligns with Robbins & Judge's views on adaptive and creative leadership (Robbins & Judge, 2017).

Intellectual stimulation also supports the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which positions teachers as facilitators of contextual and creative learning. This aligns with the 2020–2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap, which emphasizes strengthening moderate literacy and critical thinking skills in religious education. Principals provide access to literature, training, and the development of teaching materials based on religious moderation. Thus, the principals' intellectual stimulation produces Islamic Religious Education teachers who are reflective, critical, and proactive in addressing the dynamics of religious learning in the digital era. Teachers not only deliver material but also instill contextual, moderate Islamic values that are relevant to the challenges of the times, thus becoming agents of change in peaceful and inclusive education (Thoyibah & Hajizah, 2025).

Individualized Consideration

Penelitian Research shows that the principals of SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia apply a transformational leadership style that emphasizes personal attention, empathy, and contextual responsiveness to the needs of teachers and students. This approach is not solely based on administrative data but is built through direct interaction, warm communication, and active observation of the dynamics of the daily lives of the school community. In their daily lives, the principals strive to understand the diverse family backgrounds, religious traditions, economic conditions, and affiliations with religious organizations. This understanding forms the basis for adaptive school policies, emphasizing development over purely formal evaluation. Their presence in the staff room, cafeteria, sports field, or informal activities allows the principals to grasp the full social and psychological context of both teachers and students. This information is reflected in the development of comprehensive teacher and student profiles, inclusive classroom management, and decision-making that respects diversity. Differences in religious schools of thought or perspectives are not seen as threats, but as opportunities to broaden dialogue and create a safe, comfortable, and critical learning environment in line with the spirit of Islam rahmatan lil-'alamin. In addition to understanding the social and religious context, the principal also actively mentors Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, both personally and professionally. Teachers are viewed as strategic partners in shaping students' character, not simply implementers of the curriculum. This mentoring is delivered through personal interactions, informal discussions, brief communications, or spontaneous meetings tailored to the teacher's needs and classroom dynamics. The mentoring is dialogic and reflective, encouraging teachers to think critically, identify challenges, and find contextualized learning solutions. Regular forums to share best practices and design strategies for teaching religious moderation values further strengthen teachers' confidence, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as interfaith tolerance, differing views, and the phenomenon of radicalism. With this approach, the classroom becomes a more dialogic, inclusive, and conducive learning space for student character development.

Empathetic leadership is also evident in emotional support and fair responses to the individual needs of both teachers and students. The principal provides open consultation, facilitates sincere personal conversations, and demonstrates concern when facing crises or urgent needs. This approach creates a safe environment where the school community feels comfortable expressing personal concerns and academic challenges. In implementing fairness, the principal is contextual: students experiencing financial hardship receive personal support without feeling humiliated, while disciplinary infractions are addressed with educational sanctions that build awareness, rather than simply punish. Similar practices are applied to teachers, resulting in increased emotional well-being and work motivation. The school environment develops into an inclusive, harmonious, and productive climate, where teachers and students have optimal opportunities for social, emotional, and spiritual development. The principal provides ample space for teachers to experiment with various learning methods, while remaining grounded in the curriculum and moderate Islamic values. This support is affirmative, in the form of facilities, logistical support, and moral appreciation for teachers' creative ideas. Learning innovations emerge, such as the use of podcasts as discussion material, the production of thematic vlogs by students, mini-debates on interfaith tolerance, and educational games that introduce moderate Islamic figures. Popular media such as comics are used to convey the concept of religious moderation contextually, making it easier for students to understand and internalize it. Innovation doesn't stop in the classroom, but also involves parents and the school community. Religious studies involving parents demonstrate that a creative culture thrives across classroom boundaries, creating a dialogic educational ecosystem that is responsive to students' learning styles and encourages active involvement from all parties. Data triangulation from interviews, observations, and documents confirms that freedom to experiment is key to integrating the values of moderation into everyday learning experiences.

The principal also actively facilitates systematic discussions and training on moderate Islam, involving external parties such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, universities, and community organizations working on religious moderation. Speakers range from academics, religious instructors, and education practitioners. The training is dialogic and reflective, discussing strategies for countering religious hoaxes, distinguishing authentic religious teachings from extreme interpretations, and building tolerant and inclusive classrooms. As a result, teachers become more communicative, students become accustomed to asking critical questions, and parents increasingly understand the role of families in instilling the value of moderation. The principal's commitment is also reflected in fostering a culture of critical thinking and healthy dialogue about diversity. Teachers are given the freedom to apply dialogic methods, while the school provides appreciation through symbolic awards,

publication of good practices, and even the title of "Inspirational Teacher in Moderation Education." In class, teachers facilitate students' critical yet respectful discussions of sensitive issues such as differences in schools of thought, religious practices, or socio-religious phenomena. Student posters, reflective essays, and group presentations are published and appreciated, fostering intrinsic motivation. This culture of critical thinking and diversity dialogue is part of the school's strategy to shape students' character to be inclusive, moderate, and ready to live in a pluralistic society. Tolerant Islamic values are instilled through real-life learning experiences, both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities such as Rohis (Islamic student spiritual group) and the school's annual program. This intellectual stimulation contributes significantly to fostering a generation that is critical, open, and capable of maintaining harmony amidst diversity.

This personal attention aligns with the Islamic principles of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) and *tawazun* (balance). A hadith narrated by Muslim, which describes the faithful as one body, serves as a moral foundation for building empathy and genuine concern in schools. Principals exemplify humanistic relationships, foster a sense of community, and foster a fraternal work climate. This approach aligns with Paulo Freire's ideas, which emphasize dialogic and horizontal educational relationships. Such relationships enable teachers to develop without feeling pressured by authority, while fostering critical awareness. Theoretically (Bass, 1994), individualized consideration is a dimension of transformational leadership that emphasizes personal support to maximize individual potential. Leaders who consistently provide personal attention can increase teacher motivation and commitment through recognition of each individual's unique needs. Numerous studies support these findings. Principals' personal attention directly contributes to teacher job satisfaction and innovation (Munawir et al., 2025). Empathetic leadership reduces the work stress levels of Islamic Religious Education teachers and increases their involvement in strengthening religious moderation (Mu'amalah et al., 2024). National education policy also reinforces the urgency of this approach. Law Number 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers emphasizes the role of leadership in developing teacher professionalism, while the Roadmap for Religious Moderation demands empathetic, humanistic, and participatory leadership. Principals translate these policies through coaching focused on teacher well-being, strengthening self-confidence, and establishing a moderate school culture. Thus, the principal's personal attention not only improves teachers' psychological well-being but also directly impacts the quality of Islamic Religious Education learning. Teachers become more confident, responsible, and able to display a humanistic attitude in the learning process, ultimately strengthening a culture of religious moderation in schools (Wahyuni & Maunah, 2021).

Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Learning Based on Religious Moderation

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning based on religious moderation at SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP Adzzimat Da'i Indonesia is supported by transformational leadership that prioritizes personal attention and empathy for both teachers and students. The principal does not rely solely on formal data, but builds understanding through direct involvement in the daily dynamics of the school community. Interactions that occur in the teachers' lounge, cafeteria, sports field, and other informal activities provide a means of understanding family backgrounds, religious traditions, socioeconomic conditions, and even affiliations with mass organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and other local communities. This contextual approach makes school policies more adaptive and humane, beyond mere administrative evaluations. Differences in religious understanding are instead read as spaces for constructive dialogue, rather than sources of conflict, thus creating an inclusive school ecosystem aligned with the Islamic values of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (blessing for all the universe). In the process of developing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, the principal positions them as strategic partners and not simply implementers of the curriculum. Coaching is carried out dialogically through informal conversations, reflective discussion forums, and regular meetings to share experiences and learning solutions (Faozan, 2020).

This approach model gives teachers confidence in managing sensitive issues such as tolerance, diversity, and differences in religious views. As a result, Islamic Religious Education classes become more dialogical, safe, and conducive learning spaces for internalizing the values of religious moderation. Furthermore, the principal is also present to provide emotional support by opening a consultation room without complicated bureaucracy, and responds fairly to various needs. Students experiencing economic difficulties receive personal assistance without shame, while disciplinary infractions are handled in an educational manner. The same empathetic attitude is also extended to teachers, so that emotional well-being, work motivation, and the school climate are harmonious, productive, and support the social, emotional, and spiritual development of all school members. This learning practice is rooted in the principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, as

stated in QS. Al-Hujurat: 13, which affirms the equality of humans before Allah SWT, and the Prophet's hadith that emphasizes ease in religion (Narrated by Bukhari). This foundation emphasizes that religious education must prioritize compassion, openness, and ease, not exclusivity (Janah et al., 2025).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at this school is also aligned with the classical thinking of Al-Ghazali, who emphasized morals and character in education, as well as the views of Ibn Khaldun, who viewed teachers as *murobbi*/educators who guide intellectual and moral development. Teachers play a role in shaping the whole personality, not merely conveying knowledge. This implementation is based on Vygotsky's constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, and Bloom's affective domain, which emphasizes that education addresses not only cognitive aspects but also attitudes, values, and character of students (Al-Ghazali, 2020). This practice aligns with the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual learning and character building, and the 2020–2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap, which emphasizes the importance of tolerance, preventing radicalism, and cultivating national character. Thus, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at both schools has successfully instilled inclusive, tolerant, and dialogical values. This model is relevant not only to Islamic teachings but also to modern educational theory and national policy directions, thus able to produce students who are religious, critical, and have moderate character (Harianto & Abdurrahman, 2025).

Obstacles and Solutions to Implementing Religious Moderation

The implementation of religious moderation values at SMPN 4 Limbangan Garut and SMP IT Addzimati Da'i Indonesia faced a number of internal and external obstacles. These obstacles primarily stemmed from teachers' limited understanding of the concept of moderation, the lack of an explicit policy framework, and the influence of local culture, which tends to be cautious of new religious concepts. In the initial phase, some teachers showed hesitation and tended to maintain distance when the term "religious moderation" was introduced. This was due to their limited exposure to the concept during higher education and professional training, which often led to the perception of moderation as something susceptible to misinterpretation or potentially weakening the purity of faith. These obstacles were not addressed confrontationally, but rather through a transformational leadership approach that was communicative, persuasive, and highly contextual. The principal adopted a strategy of strengthening understanding slowly and measurably, for example through informal conversations after religious activities, the distribution of simple educational materials in teacher communication groups, and the screening of religious moderation videos from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in internal school forums. This strategy proved effective because it did not force sudden changes but rather built acceptance through shared awareness and experience. With this approach, the initial resistance gradually transformed into a more open and critical acceptance, allowing the process of internalizing the values of religious moderation to take place more naturally and sustainably (Muaz & Ruswandi, 2022).

In response to this, the principal adopted a patient and gradual persuasive strategy, for example, through informal discussions after religious services, sharing simple materials through internal communication groups, or showing educational videos from the Ministry of Religious Affairs during teacher meetings. This approach proved effective in reducing resistance and fostering teacher understanding naturally, without creating the impression of indoctrination. Over time, teachers' understanding began to evolve. They realized that moderation does not weaken the faith, but rather strengthens the values of justice, balance, and anti-extremism. This was evident in increasingly dialogical learning practices, more polite communication, and the opening of safe question-and-answer spaces for students. The value of moderation also began to be integrated into lesson plans, teaching materials, and learning evaluation instruments, emphasizing the wisdom and wisdom of the Quran and Hadith. The impact was evident in more open teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships; students felt more comfortable engaging in dialogue, while parents perceived teachers as more communicative. Some teachers even began mentoring colleagues who still lacked a grasp of the concept of moderation, demonstrating the emergence of a collective consciousness within the school environment (Muadin, 2022).

Another supporting factor is the existence of policies and training facilitated by the government and related institutions, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Religious Affairs Development Institute (LPMP), and the MGMP forum. This training helps teachers develop moderation-based lesson plans (RPP), manage critical but healthy classroom discussions, and respond empathetically to student questions. The training results are reflected in internal school forums and sessions sharing good practices. School principals provide support by providing facilities, time, and budgets. The legitimacy of national regulations provides space

for schools to develop a more dialogical and contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum (Sumarni et al., 2024). Observations show that teachers are more open to criticism, more empathetic in guiding students, and more willing to open spaces for healthy religious dialogue. Students also become more sensitive to diversity, able to view differences as a social reality that must be faced maturely. Other challenges arise from local culture and resistance from some parents or students to material deemed sensitive or different from previous traditions.

This resistance usually takes the form of comments or questions in informal forums. The main concern is that children could become confused or shaken in their fundamental beliefs. Schools address this issue with a persuasive, educational, and contextual approach, linking the value of moderation to local wisdom such as mutual cooperation, tolerance, and deliberation. Teachers emphasize that moderation is not a foreign concept, but rather a continuation of the noble values of society. Communication forums with parents, regular religious study groups, and informal discussions are effective ways to build understanding. The results of this strategy are evident: students demonstrate a calmer, wiser, and more open attitude toward differences, even when discussing sensitive issues. Parents have also begun to support the implementation of moderation, seeing that this concept does not undermine religious beliefs but rather enriches children's interactions with social diversity. Therefore, the successful implementation of the value of religious moderation depends heavily on the ability of principals and teachers to manage cultural spaces with an empathetic, adaptive, and dialogical approach. This communicative, persuasive, and contextual strategy emphasizes the importance of the principal's role as an authentic, reflective, and educative leader in strengthening religious moderation in schools (Rasidin et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the transformational leadership of school principals plays a strategic role in directing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning practices toward a focus on the value of religious moderation. Principals not only perform administrative functions but also serve as role models and drivers of change, directly influencing an inclusive learning climate that values diversity. Their inspiring attitude, motivational skills, visionary thinking, and personal attention to the dynamics of teachers and students have been proven to foster religious learning that is more dialogical, tolerant, and relevant to the needs of today's generation. The implementation of moderation in PAI is not only aligned with Islamic teachings and national education policies but also delivered through a contextual approach that aligns with students' lived experiences and involves active participation in the learning process. Various obstacles that arise, whether in the form of conceptual resistance or limited initial understanding, can be addressed through empathetic communication, joint reflection, and ongoing coaching. Thus, this study successfully demonstrates that transformational leadership has a significant contribution in strengthening the internalization of the value of religious moderation through effective and sustainable PAI learning.

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