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DEVELOPING AN INTER-RELIGIOUS CURRICULUM MODEL FOR ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT
Inter-religious education has become increasingly important in multicultural societies; however, the Islamic Education curriculum within Malaysia's *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) continues to emphasize moral values and social harmony without systematically incorporating inter-religious understanding, dialogue, and engagement with religious diversity. This study aims to develop an expert-validated inter-religious curriculum model for Islamic Education in Malaysia. Employing a qualitative Design and Development Research (DDR) approach, the study combined library research with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving six experts in Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis supported by ATLAS.ti. The findings identified four interconnected curriculum components: objectives focused on interfaith awareness, dialogical competence, and prejudice reduction; content introduced foundational knowledge of religions in Malaysia from historical, ethical, and cultural perspectives; teaching and learning strategies emphasized structured dialogue, inquiry-based learning, and guided experiential engagement; and assessment approaches integrated formative, summative, classroom-based, and project-based evaluation. Integrating Taba's Curriculum Development Model with al-Syaibany's principles of Islamic education, the proposed model offers a pedagogical framework for fostering interfaith literacy, respectful interaction, and multicultural understanding within Islamic educational contexts.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, Interfaith Literacy, Inter-Religious Education, Islamic Education Curriculum, Multicultural Education

INTRODUCTION
Inter-religious education has become an increasingly important issue within contemporary educational discourse, particularly in multicultural and religiously diverse societies (Hunting et al., 2026). Across many countries, religious education is no longer viewed solely as a means of strengthening students' faith identities, but also as an important platform for promoting intercultural understanding, peaceful coexistence, and social cohesion (ap Siôn et al., 2025; Barnes, 2014; Sterkens, 2001). Global educational initiatives have increasingly emphasized the need for students to develop interfaith literacy, dialogical competence, and the ability to engage constructively with religious diversity in democratic societies (Boehme, 2024; Weisse, 2010; Rockenbach et al., 2020). Within this context, inter-religious learning is understood not merely as the transmission of information about religions, but as a pedagogical process that encourages reflective understanding, mutual respect, and ethical engagement across religious differences (Schweitzer et al., 2023; Moyaert, 2019; Wielzen & Ter Avest, 2017). Consequently, educational institutions worldwide are increasingly challenged to integrate approaches to religious diversity

within curriculum frameworks while maintaining their respective theological and philosophical foundations.

Within Muslim-majority societies, these discussions are particularly relevant because Islamic education plays a central role in shaping students' religious understanding, moral formation, and social attitudes (Abdul-Jabbar et al., 2025). In Malaysia, Pendidikan Islam (Islamic religious education subject) is a compulsory subject within the national education system and functions as an important instrument for developing students' spiritual, intellectual, and ethical character in line with the philosophy of national education (Nur Nisa Solehah binti Muhamad Haswazil et al., 2026). The implementation of KSSM (*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah*/ Standard Curriculum for Secondary School) further reflects national efforts to strengthen curriculum quality and respond to the demands of twenty-first century education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016). Simultaneously, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes the importance of intercultural understanding and social harmony within Malaysia's plural social context (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). As a multicultural nation consisting of Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and other religious communities, Malaysia requires educational approaches capable of fostering respectful engagement with religious diversity while preserving religious identity and social stability (Khoo, 2026).

Despite these aspirations, previous studies indicate that inter-religious dimensions within the Islamic Education curriculum remain limited and insufficiently systematic. Existing curriculum content primarily emphasizes universal moral values such as tolerance, harmony, and respect, while providing minimal opportunities for structured engagement with religious diversity or comparative religious understanding (Salleh & Abd Khahar, 2016). More recent research by Badar et al. (2024) similarly demonstrates that inter-religious elements within the KSSM Islamic Education curriculum remain marginal and fragmented, rather than integrated into a coherent curricular framework. As a result, students may develop general attitudes of tolerance without acquiring deeper interfaith literacy, dialogical skills, or interpretive understanding of religious differences. At the global level, scholars have increasingly argued that religious education should move beyond moral instruction toward dialogical and experiential approaches that enable students to engage critically and respectfully with diverse religious traditions (Hermans, 2003; Byrne, 2011; Moyaert, 2018). However, within Islamic educational settings, integrating inter-religious learning remains challenging because curriculum development must balance openness to diversity with the preservation of Islamic theological principles and educational philosophy.

From the perspective of Islamic intellectual tradition, engagement with religious diversity is not foreign to Islamic civilization. Classical Muslim scholars such as Al-Biruni and Al-Shahrastani produced important works on comparative religion that demonstrated scholarly engagement with other faith traditions through inquiry and intellectual dialogue. Contemporary Islamic scholarship similarly emphasizes that Islam promotes justice, coexistence, and respectful interaction among different religious communities (Ramli & Awang, 2016; Khambali, 2020). Nevertheless, previous curriculum studies rarely integrate these Islamic philosophical foundations with systematic curriculum design models for inter-religious education. In particular, limited attention has been paid to combining Taba's Curriculum Development Model with al-Syaibany's philosophy of Islamic education to construct curriculum frameworks that address religious diversity within Islamic Education. This gap highlights the need for a curriculum model that is pedagogically systematic while remaining grounded in Islamic educational philosophy and values. In response to this gap, the present study aims to develop an inter-religious curriculum model for integration into Islamic Education within Malaysia's secondary school context. Specifically, the study proposes a curriculum framework consisting of learning objectives, curriculum content, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment

methods that support interfaith literacy, respectful dialogue, and constructive engagement with religious diversity. Beyond contributing to curriculum development in Malaysia, the study also contributes to broader scholarly discussions concerning Islamic pedagogy, multicultural education, and inter-religious learning in plural societies.

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative Design and Development Research (DDR) approach to develop an inter-religious curriculum model for integration into Islamic Education in Malaysian secondary schools. The study adopted an integrated three-layer theoretical framework combining Taba's Curriculum Development Model, al-Syaibany's philosophy of Islamic education, and Moyaert's interreligious pedagogical theory. Taba's model provided the structural basis for curriculum design, including the formulation of objectives, content selection, learning experiences, and assessment procedures (Taba, 1962). Meanwhile, al-Syaibany's philosophy emphasized holistic human development grounded in Islamic epistemology (Al-Syaibany, 1975), while Moyaert's interreligious learning perspective highlighted reflective dialogue and interpretive engagement with religious diversity as central elements of interfaith education (Moyaert, 2018, 2019). The integration of these frameworks enabled the development of a curriculum model that is pedagogically systematic and philosophically grounded within Islamic educational thought.

In addition, the data were collected through library research and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Library research involved analyzing academic books, journal articles, policy documents, and previous studies related to inter-religious education, Islamic educational philosophy, and curriculum development (Creswell, 2014). In addition, one semi-structured FGD session involving six experts in Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development was conducted using criterion-based purposive sampling. The selected experts possessed substantial academic and professional experience in their respective fields. The discussion focused on curriculum objectives, inter-religious content, pedagogical approaches, and assessment strategies for integrating inter-religious learning into the Islamic Education curriculum. The session lasted approximately 90–120 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data collection concluded when thematic saturation was achieved, and no substantially new insights emerged from the discussion.

After data collection, the transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with open coding, during which the transcripts were reviewed systematically to identify and label meaningful statements relevant to curriculum development and inter-religious education. These initial codes captured recurring ideas, perspectives, and experiences expressed in the data. The coded material was then organized in ATLAS.ti and examined through axial coding, which involved comparing related codes, grouping them into broader conceptual categories, and exploring relationships among those categories. Through this iterative process, four major themes emerged, corresponding to the core components of the curriculum: learning objectives, curriculum content, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment methods. The themes were then interpreted in relation to Taba's Curriculum Development Model and al-Syaibany's philosophy of Islamic education. This comparison helped establish theoretical coherence and conceptual validity for the proposed curriculum model by connecting the findings to the principles that informed its development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Structure of the Inter-Religious Elements Model

The thematic analysis of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) identified four interconnected curriculum components within the proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model for Islamic Education, namely curriculum objectives, curriculum content, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment approaches. The development of these components was informed through the integration of curriculum theory, Islamic educational philosophy, and interreligious pedagogical perspectives. The experts consistently emphasized that inter-religious learning within Islamic Education should be implemented through a systematic curriculum structure that remains grounded within Islamic educational principles while facilitating meaningful engagement with religious diversity in multicultural contexts.

The analysis further revealed that the proposed curriculum model combines the structural organization of curriculum development, the ethical and philosophical foundations of Islamic education, and dialogical approaches to inter-religious engagement. The integration of these perspectives contributed to the development of a curriculum framework that is structurally organized, philosophically grounded, and pedagogically dialogical. Table 1 presents the integrated theoretical contributions within the proposed curriculum model.

Table 1. Integration of Taba, Al-Syaibany, and Moyaert within the Proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model

Curriculum Component	Contribution from al-Syaibany's Principles of Islamic Education	Contribution from Taba's Curriculum Development Model	Contribution from Moyaert's Interreligious Pedagogy	Resulting Function in the Proposed Model
Objectives	Emphasizes holistic human development through the formation of learners as *'abd* and *khalifah*, including moral responsibility, ethical interaction, and social awareness.	Establishes curriculum objectives as the foundation for educational planning and curriculum organization.	Promotes reflective engagement, dialogical competence, and understanding of religious diversity.	Defines inter-religious learning goals that foster interfaith awareness, respectful engagement, and ethical coexistence within an Islamic educational framework.
Content	Supports the integration of revealed and rational knowledge and encourages the selection of beneficial and ethically grounded knowledge.	Guides the systematic selection and organization of curriculum content.	Encourages an interpretive understanding of religious diversity through meaningful, contextually relevant learning content.	Identifies appropriate knowledge of religions, historical and cultural dimensions, ethical values, and social sensitivities to be introduced within Islamic Education.
Teaching and Learning Strategies	Encourages pedagogical approaches that cultivate *adab*, reflective understanding, and meaningful learning experiences.	Focuses on organizing learning experiences that support curriculum objectives and learner engagement.	Emphasizes structured dialogue, inquiry-based learning, reflective discussion, and experiential engagement with religious diversity.	Develops pedagogical strategies that combine teacher-guided interaction, dialogical learning, and experiential activities within appropriate Islamic educational boundaries.

Curriculum Component	Contribution from al-Syaibany's Principles of Islamic Education	Contribution from Taba's Curriculum Development Model	Contribution from Moyaert's Interreligious Pedagogy	Resulting Function in the Proposed Model
Assessment Methods	Values continuous evaluation of intellectual, moral, ethical, and behavioral development.	Positions evaluation as an integral component of the curriculum for measuring educational outcomes.	Encourages assessment of reflective thinking, dialogical competence, empathy, and meaningful engagement.	Determines multidimensional assessment approaches that evaluate understanding, reflection, respectful interaction, and ethical engagement rather than theological agreement.

As presented in Table 1, each framework contributes a distinct yet complementary function to the proposed curriculum model. Al-Syaibany's philosophy provides its Islamic ethical and educational orientation, informing the values and principles that guide curriculum content and learning. Taba's model offers a systematic structure for curriculum development, supporting the organization of objectives, content, learning experiences, and evaluation. Moyaert's perspective enriches the model's dialogical and reflective dimensions by emphasizing engagement across religious perspectives and reflection on difference. Together, these frameworks provide an integrated conceptual foundation for the proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model, linking ethical orientation, curricular structure, and inter-religious dialogue.

The following sections offer a detailed exploration of thematic findings on curriculum objectives, content, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches. Together, these areas illuminate the key considerations for effectively integrating inter-religious learning into Islamic Education, including what students are expected to learn, the knowledge and materials addressed, the teaching methods used, and how learning is assessed.

Empirical Findings from the Focus Group Discussions

The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed a strong consensus among the experts regarding the importance of integrating inter-religious elements into Islamic Education within Malaysian secondary schools. The participants consistently emphasized that as religious diversity becomes more prominent in contemporary society, Islamic Education must evolve beyond mere moral instruction. It should encompass the development of interfaith literacy, fostering respectful engagement between different faith communities, enhancing dialogical competencies, and actively working toward reducing prejudice and misconceptions. Such an integrated approach is essential to prepare students for a multicultural and pluralistic society, promoting mutual understanding and harmony. At the same time, the experts stressed that inter-religious learning should remain grounded within Islamic educational principles and should support ethical coexistence without compromising Islamic identity. The thematic analysis further demonstrated a strong convergence of perspectives among experts in Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development regarding the need for a systematically structured inter-religious curriculum framework. The empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Expert-Derived Curriculum Elements within the Proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model

Curriculum Component	Thematic Element	Description of Expert Perspectives	Illustrative FGD Evidence
Objectives	Interfaith awareness grounded in Islamic principles	Students should develop awareness that Islam encourages understanding and respectful engagement with others within plural society.	"*To get to know neighbours through studying.*" (PIPA02, personal communication, August 2023)
	Foundational understanding of other religions	Inter-religious learning should include basic understanding of religions beyond superficial interaction.	"*It's time to expose knowledge of religions other than Islam.*" (PIPA01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Dialogical competence	Students should acquire communication skills for respectful inter-religious dialogue and interaction.	"*To acquire the knowledge and skills for dialogue or interaction with people of other religions."* (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Reduction of prejudice and stereotypes	Inter-religious learning should reduce social prejudice and strengthen mutual respect among religious communities.	"*The goal of reducing stereotypes … to reduce prejudice … and create a sense of respect.*" (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
Content	Historical foundations of religions in Malaysia	Students should understand the historical development of religions within Malaysian society.	"*We can explain the early history of the development of something religious.*" (PIPA01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Similarities and differences across religions	Curriculum content should introduce both common values and distinct religious characteristics.	"*We should focus more on similarities and differences of religion in Malaysia.*" (PIPA02, personal communication, August 2023)
	Ethical guidelines and religious sensitivities	Students should understand practical social sensitivities and appropriate inter-religious interaction.	"*We also got to know the do's and don'ts.*" (PIPA02, personal communication, August 2023)
	Accessible cultural dimensions of religions	Cultural practices and everyday examples should be used to support contextual understanding.	"*Our meaning shouldn't be too deep. Take food, for instance.*" (PPK02, personal communication, August 2023)
Teaching and Learning Strategies	Structured inter-religious dialogue	Learning activities should include guided dialogue within safe and structured educational settings.	"*We do training in inter-religious dialogue between them.*" (PIPA02, personal communication, August 2023)
	Inquiry-based learning	Students should investigate religious diversity through guided inquiry and questioning.	"*I propose a method of teaching that is inquiry-based learning.*" (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Experiential inter-religious engagement	Learning should involve experiential activities such as forums, visits, and interviews.	"*Maybe we can organize activities like forums.*" (PIPA01, personal communication, August 2023)

Curriculum Component	Thematic Element	Description of Expert Perspectives	Illustrative FGD Evidence
Assessment Methods	Teacher-guided facilitation	Teachers should guide dialogue and maintain doctrinal clarity and classroom boundaries.	"*Student-centered learning, teacher as facilitator.*" (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Formative assessment	Continuous assessment should monitor students' developing understanding and engagement.	*"Teachers may use continuous assessment, i.e. formative assessment."* (PPK01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Summative assessment	Formal assessment should evaluate understanding and application of inter-religious learning.	"*Summative assessment [is] more on understanding and application.*" (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Classroom-based assessment	Assessment should be integrated into everyday classroom learning processes.	"*We do the assessment on the basis of classroom-based assessment.*" (PPI01, personal communication, August 2023)
	Project- and presentation-based assessment	Students should demonstrate understanding through projects, presentations, and applied activities.	"*Knowledge is applied in an external study project and then presented in class.*" (PIPA02, personal communication, August 2023)
	Short quizzes	Short assessments may reinforce understanding and monitor learning progression.	"*Continuous assessment consists of various short quizzes.*" (PPI02, personal communication, August 2023)

Source: Developed from thematic analysis of Focus Group Discussions (2024).

The findings presented in Table 2 demonstrate that the experts proposed a comprehensive, interconnected curriculum framework for integrating inter-religious learning into Islamic Education. Across all curriculum components, participants emphasized the need to balance meaningful engagement with religious diversity while upholding Islamic educational principles. They further indicated that this integration should be guided by clearly structured objectives and content suited to the learners' context, supported by dialogical teaching and experiential learning opportunities, and evaluated through multidimensional assessment approaches. Taken together, these findings suggest that inter-religious learning should extend beyond abstract discussions of tolerance and harmony, incorporating practical, purposeful learning experiences that connect these values to educational practice.

The thematic consistency across experts in Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development provides strong triangulation, reinforcing the need for systematic curriculum integration. Across these perspectives, the findings suggest that inter-religious learning within Islamic Education should extend beyond introducing students to different faith traditions. It should cultivate interfaith awareness by helping learners recognize religious diversity; encourage reflective understanding through thoughtful engagement with differing beliefs and practices; and promote ethical engagement grounded in empathy, fairness, and mutual respect. It should also support respectful social interaction, equipping students to communicate and collaborate constructively within multicultural educational settings. The following sections elaborate on each curriculum component identified through the thematic analysis.

Curriculum Objectives for Inter-Religious Learning

The thematic analysis identified several interconnected objectives underlying the proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model, including interfaith awareness, respectful engagement, dialogical competence, reduction of prejudice, and ethical coexistence. The findings indicate that inter-religious learning within Islamic Education was not conceptualized merely as the transmission of information about religious diversity, but rather as an educational process aimed at cultivating ethical, social, and dialogical capacities among students. Across the FGDs, participants consistently emphasized that students should develop informed understanding of religious diversity within Malaysian society while maintaining Islamic identity and ethical responsibility. The objectives identified through the analysis collectively position inter-religious learning as a socially oriented and ethically grounded dimension of Islamic Education.

The analysis further revealed strong emphasis on developing students' ability to engage constructively with individuals from different religious backgrounds through respectful interaction, communication skills, and reduction of social prejudice. Participants viewed inter-religious learning as an important mechanism for fostering social understanding, reducing stereotypes, and preparing students for responsible participation within multicultural society. In addition, the findings demonstrate that ethical coexistence was consistently linked to Islamic educational principles that emphasize mutual respect, responsible interaction, and peaceful social relations. Collectively, these findings indicate that the proposed curriculum objectives extend beyond cognitive understanding to encompass broader ethical and social development within a pluralistic educational context.

Teaching and Learning Strategies for Inter-Religious Engagement

The thematic analysis identified several pedagogical strategies considered appropriate for implementing inter-religious learning within Islamic Education. Across the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants consistently emphasized that inter-religious learning requires structured and carefully facilitated pedagogical approaches rather than unstructured exposure to religious diversity. The findings indicate that the proposed curriculum model prioritizes guided dialogical engagement, inquiry-based learning, reflective interaction, and experiential learning activities supported through active teacher facilitation. Collectively, these pedagogical strategies position inter-religious learning as an active and participatory educational process intended to promote meaningful understanding, respectful interaction, and reflective engagement with religious diversity.

The analysis further revealed strong emphasis on structured dialogue and inquiry-based learning as important mechanisms for encouraging students to engage constructively with religious diversity. Participants viewed dialogue not merely as informal conversation, but as a guided educational activity designed to develop communication skills, listening abilities, reflective understanding, and mutual respect within multicultural settings. Inquiry-based learning was similarly regarded as important for encouraging students to explore religious diversity critically and responsibly through teacher-guided investigation and discussion. In addition, the findings demonstrate strong support for experiential learning activities such as forums, visits, interviews, and community interaction in order to connect classroom learning with lived social experiences.

Another important finding concerns the role of teacher facilitation, sensitivity management, and classroom boundaries in implementing inter-religious learning. Participants consistently emphasized that teachers should maintain responsibility for guiding discussion, ensuring doctrinal clarity, managing sensitive interaction, and preserving appropriate educational boundaries throughout the learning process. The findings indicate that the experts did not support completely unstructured, student-centered interaction, but instead proposed a

balanced pedagogical approach that combines active student participation with careful teacher guidance and ethical facilitation. Collectively, these findings suggest that the proposed teaching and learning strategies were designed to support meaningful inter-religious engagement while maintaining Islamic educational principles, pedagogical responsibility, and classroom stability within multicultural educational contexts.

Assessment Approaches for Inter-Religious Learning

The thematic analysis identified assessment as an essential component of the proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model. Across the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants consistently emphasized that inter-religious learning should not be assessed solely through factual recall or doctrinal knowledge. Instead, the findings indicate that assessment within the proposed curriculum model should evaluate students' understanding of religious diversity, dialogical competence, reflective thinking, empathy, and responsible social interaction. The proposed assessment approaches therefore integrate cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning while remaining aligned with the broader educational objectives of inter-religious engagement within Islamic Education.

The analysis further revealed strong support for multidimensional and continuous assessment approaches involving formative assessment, reflective activities, classroom-based assessment, project-based learning, presentations, and behavioral observation. Participants consistently viewed assessment as an ongoing educational process integrated into everyday teaching and learning activities rather than relying exclusively on formal examinations. In addition to evaluating students' understanding of religious diversity, the experts emphasized the importance of assessing communication skills, respectful interaction, listening abilities, collaboration, and ethical engagement during classroom participation and experiential learning activities. Project-based and presentation-based assessments were also regarded as important mechanisms for evaluating students' inquiry skills, reflective understanding, and practical engagement with multicultural social realities.

Another important finding concerns the emphasis placed on reflective and ethical dimensions of assessment. Participants repeatedly stressed that the purpose of assessment within inter-religious learning is not to measure theological agreement with other religions, but rather to evaluate students' ability to engage responsibly, respectfully, and reflectively with religious diversity. The findings demonstrate strong thematic consistency across experts from Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development regarding the importance of assessing empathy, openness, ethical behavior, and respectful communication alongside cognitive understanding. Collectively, these findings indicate that the proposed assessment framework was designed to support multidimensional learning, reflective engagement, and ethical coexistence within multicultural educational contexts while maintaining Islamic educational principles and pedagogical boundaries.

Development of the Inter-Religious Elements Model for Islamic Education

The thematic analysis resulted in the development of an integrated Inter-Religious Elements Model for Islamic Education in Malaysian secondary schools. The proposed model consists of four interconnected curriculum components, curriculum objectives, curriculum content, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment approaches. Collectively, these components serve as a structured curriculum framework for integrating inter-religious learning within Islamic Education while upholding Islamic educational principles, pedagogical guidance, and sensitivity to religious diversity. The findings indicate that inter-religious learning was conceptualized not as an isolated instructional topic, but as a systematically organized educational process embedded across multiple curriculum dimensions.

The analysis further revealed that the four curriculum components function as an interconnected system rather than as separate educational elements. Curriculum objectives establish the foundational direction of inter-religious learning by defining its intended aims and guiding the selection of relevant content. That content, in turn, informs the pedagogical approaches used in classroom instruction and experiential learning activities, helping ensure that teaching methods are appropriate to what students are expected to learn. Assessment approaches are likewise aligned with both the learning objectives and pedagogical strategies, providing a multidimensional evaluation of students' understanding, reflective engagement, communication skills, and ethical interaction. Taken together, these relationships indicate that each component both supports and shapes the others, contributing to a coherent learning process. This interconnected structure also reflects strong thematic consistency among experts in Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development, who emphasized the importance of a balanced and systematically organized approach to inter-religious learning within Islamic Education.

In Malaysia, Islamic Education serves a role that extends beyond religious instruction, contributing to students' moral, social, and civic development. Against this backdrop, the study's findings support treating inter-religious learning as a core part of the curriculum in multicultural societies, rather than as an optional supplement. The proposed Inter-Religious Elements Model shows how this learning can be integrated systematically while remaining rooted in Islamic educational principles. It encompasses interfaith literacy, respectful engagement, dialogical competence, and ethical coexistence, helping students develop the knowledge and capacities needed to engage thoughtfully across religious differences.

Moreover, the study indicates that approaches centered on broad moral principles, including tolerance and harmony, do not adequately prepare students to engage responsibly in increasingly diverse social settings. Because these approaches often lack depth, they may not develop the nuanced understanding needed for genuine intercultural competence. Experts therefore stressed the importance of providing structured opportunities for students to learn about religious diversity, participate in dialogue, and form informed attitudes toward people of different faiths. These experiences can foster empathy, lessen prejudice, and support respectful coexistence. Accordingly, inter-religious engagement should be treated as a systematic educational responsibility in Islamic Education, rather than as an incidental outcome of multicultural exposure, and meaningfully incorporated into curricula and teaching practices.

These findings reinforce previous scholarship highlighting the limited integration of inter-religious elements within the existing Pendidikan Islam curriculum. Salleh and Abd Khahar (2016) observed that inter-religious understanding within Islamic and moral education remains insufficiently developed and largely restricted to general moral discourse. Similarly, Badar et al. (2024) demonstrated that inter-religious elements within the KSSM Islamic Education curriculum remain fragmented and minimally embedded within curriculum structures. The present study extends these earlier studies by moving beyond critique and proposing a structured curriculum model that specifies objectives, content, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches for inter-religious learning.

Subsequently, a significant gap exists between policy aspirations and curriculum practice in Malaysia. While the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes intercultural understanding and social cohesion, Islamic Education continues to focus primarily on moral development, with inter-religious engagement not systematically incorporated into curriculum implementation. This indicates that broader educational goals concerning multicultural coexistence have not yet been fully operationalized within Islamic Education curriculum structures. Consequently, the findings suggest that curriculum reform requires more explicit pedagogical frameworks capable of addressing religious diversity within plural societies. One of

the most significant implications of the study concerns the shift from general moral tolerance toward inter-religious literacy. The experts consistently emphasized that students should not simply be encouraged to "respect others," but should also develop foundational understanding of religious traditions, dialogical competence, and awareness of inter-religious sensitivities. These findings indicate that inter-religious learning requires more than moral encouragement alone; rather, it requires structured educational engagement capable of fostering interpretive understanding and reflective interaction with religious diversity (Fauyan et al., 2026).

This interpretation closely aligns with Barnes' (2014) argument that religious education in plural societies should foster thoughtful interpretation and informed understanding, rather than simply offering a superficial celebration of diversity. Similarly, Sterkens (2001) emphasized that meaningful interreligious learning depends on active engagement with different religious perspectives, not merely passive awareness that religious differences exist. The findings of this study support these perspectives by proposing a curriculum that includes the historical foundations of religions, the similarities and differences among traditions, ethical sensitivities, and accessible cultural dimensions of religious life. Taken together, these elements suggest that interreligious literacy encompasses more than factual knowledge: it also involves reflective understanding of diverse beliefs and practices, alongside the ethical engagement needed to approach religious diversity with care and respect.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that inter-religious literacy within Islamic Education cannot simply replicate secular models of religious literacy. Instead, inter-religious learning must remain grounded within Islamic ethical and epistemological principles. This reflects al-Syaibany's (1975) conception of Islamic education as the holistic cultivation of morally and intellectually balanced individuals through the integration of revealed and rational knowledge. In this context, learning about religious diversity becomes part of Islamic ethical formation rather than an external addition to Islamic Education (Syarif et al., 2024). The findings also resonate with broader Islamic intellectual traditions concerning engagement with religious diversity. Classical Muslim scholars such as Al-Biruni and Al-Shahrastani produced systematic works examining religious traditions through comparative and scholarly inquiry. These traditions demonstrate that the study of religious diversity possesses legitimate foundations within Islamic intellectual history. Consequently, the findings of this study highlight the continued relevance of these intellectual traditions for contemporary Islamic Education within plural societies (Muliadi et al., 2025; Ruslan et al., 2025).

Another important implication of the findings concerns the ethical and civic dimensions of inter-religious learning. The experts repeatedly emphasized prejudice reduction, respectful interaction, and dialogical competence as central educational objectives. This indicates that inter-religious learning within Islamic Education extends beyond cognitive understanding toward broader ethical and civic formation. The proposed curriculum model therefore positions inter-religious learning not only as a means of acquiring knowledge about religious diversity, but also as preparation for responsible participation within multicultural social environments. This finding is consistent with Islamic perspectives emphasizing ethical engagement through principles of justice, dignity, and responsible coexistence. Ramli and Awang (2016) argue that Islamic approaches to interfaith dialogue are grounded in ethical commitments rather than strategic coexistence alone. Similarly, Khambali (2020) highlighted the importance of *fiqh al-taʿāyush* in supporting constructive engagement within plural societies. The experts' repeated emphasis on reducing social distance and fostering respectful interaction reflects these broader Islamic ethical principles.

In this context, international scholarship also frames interreligious learning as a foundation for peacebuilding and democratic coexistence. Wingerden et al. (2012) explain that it supports peace education by equipping learners to engage with religious differences without

fear or prejudice. Likewise, Weisse's (2010) REDCo project demonstrated that respectful classroom dialogue regarding religious diversity can strengthen mutual understanding among students. The present study extends these perspectives within Islamic Education by demonstrating that inter-religious learning can contribute simultaneously to Islamic ethical formation and multicultural civic engagement. One of the strongest contributions of this study concerns the pedagogical dimension of inter-religious learning. The findings indicate that inter-religious learning cannot be effectively implemented through traditional teacher-centered instruction alone. However, the experts also rejected unstructured forms of student-centered pluralistic discussion. Instead, the proposed model supports what may be described as guided dialogical pedagogy, in which inquiry, dialogue, reflective discussion, and experiential learning occur within carefully structured educational boundaries facilitated by teachers.

This pedagogical orientation strongly reflects Moyaert's (2018, 2019) emphasis on reflective dialogue and interpretive engagement within interreligious learning. The findings demonstrate that structured dialogue, inquiry-based learning, experiential engagement, and reflective interaction were consistently regarded by experts as important strategies for developing meaningful inter-religious understanding. At the same time, teacher guidance was emphasized as essential for maintaining doctrinal clarity, emotional safety, and pedagogical structure throughout classroom interaction. These findings therefore suggest that dialogical pedagogy within Islamic Education requires a balance between openness toward diversity and preservation of Islamic educational boundaries. The findings further resonate with broader scholarship on participatory religious education. Hermans (2003) argued that meaningful religious learning requires interpretive engagement within social contexts rather than passive reception of information, while Byrne (2011) emphasized that interfaith education should move beyond superficial dialogue toward more reflective engagement with diversity. Similarly, Engebretson (2012) and Wielzen and Ter Avest (2017) demonstrated that interfaith learning becomes more meaningful when students encounter lived religious experiences through forums, visits, and interaction with real communities. The present study extends these perspectives by identifying pedagogical strategies specifically appropriate for Islamic educational settings.

The findings concerning curriculum content and assessment also demonstrate important implications for curriculum development within Islamic Education. The experts emphasized content that balances educational appropriateness with meaningful understanding of religious diversity through historical context, ethical sensitivities, similarities and differences across religions, and accessible cultural dimensions of religious life. At the same time, the proposed assessment approaches extend beyond factual recall toward multidimensional evaluation involving reflective thinking, empathy, dialogical competence, classroom participation, and project-based engagement. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the proposed curriculum model integrates objectives, content, pedagogy, and assessment into a coherent framework grounded simultaneously in curriculum theory, Islamic educational philosophy, and interreligious pedagogy. The integration of Taba's structural curriculum logic, al-Syaibany's Islamic educational philosophy, and Moyaert's dialogical pedagogical perspective therefore represents the central theoretical contribution of the study. Finally, the findings indicate that successful implementation of inter-religious learning requires careful curriculum planning, teacher preparation, ethical facilitation, and institutional support to ensure that engagement with religious diversity remains pedagogically meaningful and educationally responsible within multicultural Islamic educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study developed an Inter-Religious Elements Model for integration into the Islamic Education curriculum in Malaysian secondary schools through a qualitative Design and Development Research (DDR) approach involving expert perspectives from Islamic Education, Comparative Religion, and Curriculum Development. The findings demonstrate that inter-religious learning within Islamic Education can be systematically implemented through four interconnected curriculum components: learning objectives, curriculum content, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment approaches. The proposed model emphasizes interfaith awareness, respectful engagement, dialogical competence, reflective learning, and ethical coexistence while maintaining Islamic educational principles and theological boundaries. The integration of Taba's Curriculum Development Model, al-Syaibany's philosophy of Islamic education, and Moyaert's interreligious pedagogical perspective provides a curriculum framework that is structurally systematic, philosophically grounded, and pedagogically dialogical. The study contributes theoretically to the discourse on Islamic pedagogy and interfaith education by demonstrating that inter-religious literacy can be developed within faith-based educational settings without compromising Islamic identity. Practically, the findings provide implications for curriculum reform, teacher preparation, and multicultural educational policy in Malaysia and other plural societies.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

SB: conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, data validation, manuscript writing, editing, final preparation. AIBJ: conceptualization, methodology, interpretation of results and discussion, manuscript final review. KMK: conceptualization, interpretation of results and discussion, manuscript final review.

CONFLICT INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

GENERATIVE AI STATEMENT

ChatGPT and Gemini were used to assist with language refinement and manuscript preparation. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

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