



The Leadership of School Principals as Drivers of Religious Moderation in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Religious moderation has become a critical issue in contemporary education, particularly in multicultural societies like Indonesia. This study explores the leadership practices of school principals in promoting religious moderation in elementary schools in Rantepao Sub-district, North Toraja Regency. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study method, data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation at two schools: SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao. The findings reveal that school principals play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive environments that reflect the values of tolerance, harmony, and mutual respect. Strategies include integrating religious moderation into the curriculum, implementing interfaith extracurricular activities, and adopting participatory and adaptive leadership approaches. These efforts have created harmonious school cultures, developing students' character in appreciating diversity and strengthening relationships between schools and the surrounding community. Despite challenges, such as initial resistance from some teachers and parents, the principals successfully addressed these issues through open dialogue and persuasive approaches. The findings underscore the importance of transformational leadership in creating inclusive educational settings and promoting religious moderation to maintain harmony in diverse societies. This study contributes practical insights for developing education policies grounded in moderation and equality.

Keywords: Religious Moderation; Leadership; Elementary Schools; Inclusivity; School Culture; Tolerance; Diversity.

Introduction

Religious moderation has become a pivotal issue in contemporary education, particularly in multicultural societies where interfaith harmony is essential (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Mala & Hunaida, 2023; Marjani, 2023). Elementary schools are foundational in cultivating tolerance, respect, and inclusivity values among students (Ansori et al., 2024; Setiawan, 2024). However, achieving these objectives demands

effective leadership from school principals. As the primary leaders in educational institutions, principals are responsible for managing school operations and fostering an environment that reflects the principles of religious moderation (Islamy, 2021; Nazilah et al., 2024; Tarman, 2022). Their leadership directly influences teachers' performance, the school culture, and the development of students' character in embracing diversity.

The role of principals in education requires a balance between managerial responsibilities and transformative leadership (Heenan & Lafferty, 2024; Humam et al., 2024; Uhbiyati, 2021). Principals must demonstrate an ability to understand and utilize diversity within their schools to promote collaboration among teachers, students, and staff (Leggett et al., 2022; Leithwood, 2021; Mcghie-richmond, 2020). It aligns with the guidance of Surah al-Nisa (4:58) of the Qur'an, which emphasizes the importance of justice in fulfilling responsibilities: *"Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice. Excellent is that which Allah instructs you. Indeed, Allah is ever Hearing and Seeing (RI, 2019)."*

Quraish Shihab's interpretation of this verse underscores the ethical responsibility of leaders to act with fairness and integrity (M. Quraish Shihab, 2002). These principles are essential for school principals in guiding their institutions towards religious moderation (Aruman et al., 2024; Mala & Hunaida, 2023; Nazilah et al., 2024; Riaz et al., 2023). Additionally, the prophetic tradition narrated by Ibn Umar (HR. Bukhari) highlights the accountability of every leader to their subordinates and Allah, emphasizing the spiritual and moral dimensions of leadership (Al-Bukhari, 2007; Salaudeen & Dukawa, 2021).

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has institutionalized religious moderation through various strategic programs, highlighting its significance in fostering inclusivity (Aruman et al., 2024; Hidayah et al., 2024; Muhsin & Kususiyanah, 2024). One notable initiative is Decree No. 183 of 2019, which integrates religious moderation into the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in madrasahs (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Hamdi et al., 2022; Mappaenre et al., 2023). This effort is mirrored in public schools, contributing to the broader educational framework. In North Toraja Regency, the coexistence of diverse religious communities exemplifies the potential for effective leadership to nurture harmony and mutual respect, making the role of principals even more critical.

This study explores the leadership practices of school principals in promoting religious moderation in elementary schools in North Toraja Regency. It focuses on identifying the strategies principals employ, understanding the challenges they face, and assessing the impact of their efforts on creating an inclusive school environment. The findings are expected to contribute to the academic discourse on leadership in education while offering practical insights for improving school culture through the values of tolerance and diversity.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design (Hennink et al., 2020) to explore the role of school principals in promoting religious moderation in elementary schools. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of complex social

phenomena in their natural settings, while the descriptive design provides detailed accounts of the observed practices, strategies, and outcomes. The study adopts a case study method to focus on the specific context of leadership in fostering religious moderation. This approach allows the researcher to investigate the unique practices and challenges school principals face in creating inclusive and harmonious school environments.

Participants

The participants of this study include key stakeholders from two elementary schools in Rantepao Sub-district, North Toraja Regency, namely SD Negeri 1 and SD Kristen 5. These schools were chosen due to their diverse student populations and active involvement in implementing religious moderation initiatives. The participants comprise school principals, teachers, and students. The school principals serve as the primary focus, providing insights into their leadership practices. Teachers contribute their perspectives on the implementation and impact of religious moderation values under the principals' guidance, while students observe the attitudes and behaviours shaped by these practices. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and detailed information for the study.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher is the primary instrument, ensuring flexibility and adaptability in data collection and analysis. Several tools were utilized to support the research process, including observation guidelines to systematically document school activities, interactions, and leadership practices; interview protocols to guide semi-structured discussions with participants while allowing for probing questions; and documentation checklists to identify and collect relevant materials such as school policies, lesson plans, and records of religious moderation activities.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over one month using three primary techniques. Observation was performed directly at the research sites to capture the principals' leadership activities and interactions with teachers and students. This method provided a firsthand account of how religious moderation was implemented in daily school operations. Interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and students to gather detailed information about their experiences and perceptions. These semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for participants to share their insights while enabling the researcher to explore emerging themes. Lastly, documentation involves collecting and analyzing relevant materials, including school policies, lesson plans, and activity records. These documents provided contextual support and validation for the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles et al. (2014), which includes three main stages. The first stage, data condensation, involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying the data to identify key themes and patterns. This process included categorizing observational notes, transcribing interview recordings, and

summarizing document analyses. The second stage, data display, organized the data into narrative descriptions, tables, and matrices to illustrate the relationships between leadership practices and the outcomes of religious moderation. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher synthesized and validated the findings through triangulation by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation. This iterative process ensured the credibility and reliability of the conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

Results

The Role of Principals as Drivers of Religious Moderation in Elementary Schools

The principals at SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao play a pivotal role in promoting religious moderation as a core value in their schools. Their leadership styles reflect a commitment to fostering inclusivity, tolerance, and respect among students, staff, and the broader community. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal, Bare' Pabisa, S.Pd., M.Pd., emphasized that religious moderation involves balancing practicing one's beliefs and respecting others. He described his perspective on religious moderation as follows:

"Religious moderation is a set of values visible in someone's attitude, which avoids extremism, stays centered, and respects others' beliefs. Even before the government introduced the term 'moderation,' the Toraja community had already practised it by valuing mutual respect and love among people of different religions."

The school's vision, "Becoming an Excellent, Environmentally Conscious, and Christian Characterized School," incorporates these values into its educational and extracurricular activities. The principal stated that these values are implemented through curriculum design and character-building projects under the Pancasila Student Profile initiative. The initiative emphasizes values such as civility, national pride, and respect for religious and cultural differences. The Deputy Principal of Curriculum, Yohana Palungan, S.Pd., elaborated on the purpose of teaching religious moderation in the school:

"The concept of religious moderation aims to shape students' actions and understanding as individuals in a pluralistic society. It helps them develop values that allow them to contribute positively to their communities."

The school actively integrates these values into daily practices and academic content. A teacher at SD Kristen Rantepao 5, explained how religious moderation is incorporated into lessons:

"As I understand, religious moderation is about integrating national and religious perspectives. Students are guided to understand and maintain national agreements amidst differing beliefs and viewpoints."

The school also fosters these principles through collaborative activities, discussions, and community events, encouraging students to practice respect and tolerance. At SD

Negeri 1 Rantepao, the principal, Ratnawati, S.Pd., M.Pd., interprets religious moderation as a balanced value system that promotes harmony within diverse communities. She shared her understanding of the concept during an interview:

"Religious moderation means being in the middle—maintaining balance. It is a value system that ensures harmony while respecting each individual's beliefs."

This philosophy aligns with the school's vision of producing students with noble character and respect for diversity. The principal highlighted the goal of religious moderation in fostering humanistic values:

"Religious moderation means treating others as humans and living together without mixing religious doctrines and practices. It reflects the ultimate goal of living harmoniously despite differences."

The school reinforces these values through its tagline, "LISA CANTIK" (Lihat Sampah Ambil, Baca dan Temukan Ide Kreatif). This program emphasizes cleanliness, creativity, and mutual respect. A teacher, Rahima Tiba, S.Pd., described how this program connects with religious moderation:

"The 'LISA CANTIK' tagline reflects the school's character and the integration of religious moderation in the curriculum. It teaches students to respect differences and live harmoniously with others."

Beyond academics, the school organizes interfaith community service projects and events that foster cooperation and mutual understanding. A student, Amelia Rizal, shared her experiences with these initiatives:

"Our principal often reminds us to respect friends of different religions. For example, during religious holidays of other faiths, we are taught to honor their practices without disturbing them."

The principals' leadership in both schools is a model for how educational institutions can cultivate respect and understanding among students while preparing them to thrive in a diverse society. Through their strategies and initiatives, these schools successfully embed the principles of religious moderation into their daily practices and long-term goals.

Efforts of Principals in Driving Religious Moderation

The principals of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao actively implement strategic efforts to promote religious moderation within their respective schools. These efforts are embedded in their leadership practices, daily school activities, and community interactions, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and respect for diversity. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal, Bare' Pabisa, S.Pd., M.Pd., has integrated religious moderation into the school's vision, mission, and programs. This

approach ensures that the concept is taught and practiced in daily school life. The principal encourages the school community to respect religious diversity and fosters an inclusive environment where all beliefs are acknowledged and valued. He stated during an interview:

"In leading this school, I believe that religious moderation is not just about tolerance but about living harmoniously while firmly adhering to one's beliefs. Students must learn this balance early in life."

To achieve this, the school organizes various programs that reflect the values of religious moderation, such as character-building workshops, interfaith dialogues, and collaborative activities. Teachers are encouraged to integrate lessons on mutual respect and national unity into their teaching. According to Yohana Palungan, S.Pd., Deputy Principal for Curriculum, this approach is vital for shaping students' understanding:

"Through our curriculum, we aim to teach students how to respect others' beliefs while remaining steadfast in their faith. This balance is the essence of religious moderation."

The principal also facilitates community service projects that involve students in activities promoting unity, such as cleaning religious sites of different faiths. Initially, some resistance was observed from teachers who feared that these activities might dilute students' religious convictions. However, through continuous dialogue and reassurance, these concerns were addressed. The principal explained:

"We had hesitant teachers, thinking that cleaning religious sites of other faiths might weaken their beliefs. I explained that respecting others does not mean compromising our faith. Over time, they understood and even became active participants in these projects."

At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, the principal, Ratnawati, S.Pd., M.Pd., emphasizes a similar approach, focusing on instilling values of respect and harmony. She actively involves teachers and students in creating an inclusive school culture. The school's tagline, "LISA CANTIK" (Lihat Sampah Ambil, Baca dan Temukan Ide Kreatif), is a foundation for integrating religious moderation into daily activities. During an interview, she explained:

"Religious moderation is about balance and respect. We ensure that our students learn this through practical activities that involve cooperation and mutual understanding among peers of different faiths."

The principal also conducts regular discussions with teachers to ensure the integration of religious moderation into the curriculum. These discussions often involve brainstorming sessions on how to implement the values of religious moderation effectively. A teacher, Arlin Datu Masali, S.Pd., shared:

"The principal encourages us to include lessons on national unity and respect for diversity in our teaching. She often provides examples of how to connect these values with our subject matter."

Moreover, the principal has introduced interfaith events encouraging students to learn about and appreciate other religions. One notable initiative involves celebrating religious holidays together while respecting individual faith practices. A student, Siska, from Grade VI, shared her perspective:

"Our principal often reminds us to respect our friends' beliefs. During religious holidays, we are encouraged to share stories about our traditions, which helps us understand each other better."

Both principals also prioritize teacher training to equip staff with the tools to effectively teach and model religious moderation. Open dialogues are conducted to address concerns and ensure consensus among teachers and parents. These collaborative efforts are essential for building a cohesive school environment that reflects the values of inclusivity, respect, and harmony. Through their strategic leadership, the principals of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao have successfully fostered a culture of religious moderation, preparing students to navigate and contribute positively to a diverse society.

Impact of Principals' Efforts on Religious Moderation

The efforts of the principals at SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao in driving religious moderation have yielded significant impacts within the school communities, encompassing the social, cultural, and educational dimensions of their environments. These impacts reflect the effectiveness of their leadership strategies and the broader acceptance and internalization of religious moderation values among students, teachers, and the community. The most noticeable impact is creating a harmonious school environment where tolerance is a core value. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal's efforts to embed religious moderation into the school culture have increased mutual respect among students from diverse religious backgrounds. Teachers report that students are now more open to engaging in interfaith discussions and activities, breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions. The principal shared:

"Our school used to have some resistance to interfaith activities, but through continuous education and practice, students now look forward to these events. They understand that respecting others does not mean compromising their own beliefs."

This sentiment was echoed by a teacher who observed that students are now more empathetic toward peers of different religions:

"We see students actively participating in interfaith discussions. For example, during religious holidays, they exchange greetings and learn about each other's practices without prejudice. It's a significant shift in attitude compared to previous years."

At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, the principal's inclusive leadership has fostered an environment where students and teachers feel empowered to celebrate diversity. The school's "LISA CANTI" program integrates environmental consciousness with values of mutual respect and teamwork. According to the principal:

"Through programs like 'LISA CANTI,' students learn that working together, regardless of religious differences, is fundamental to building a better community. It has strengthened their sense of belonging and teamwork."

Another significant impact is the reduction of prejudice among students and staff. At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, the principal implemented teacher training sessions to recognize and address unconscious biases. One teacher noted:

"The workshops helped us understand how our words and actions, even unintentionally, can perpetuate stereotypes. Now, I'm more mindful of how I teach topics related to religion and culture."

Similarly, a student shared how these efforts have influenced her perspective:

"Before, I didn't understand why some of my friends practised their faith differently. Now, I've learned to appreciate the meaning behind their traditions. It's interesting and inspiring."

Including activities such as interfaith service projects has further helped break down barriers. Teachers have observed that students who are initially hesitant to interact with peers of different faiths have become more accepting and collaborative.

The principals' efforts have also extended beyond the schools, positively impacting the surrounding communities. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal organized interfaith dialogues involving parents and local leaders. These events provided a platform for discussing common values and addressing misconceptions. A parent expressed their appreciation:

"These dialogues have opened my eyes to the richness of other traditions. I now encourage my children to be more inclusive in their friendships."

At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, community service projects, such as cleaning shared spaces and religious sites, have strengthened ties between the school and the local community. The principal emphasized:

"Our students are ambassadors of religious moderation. When they work alongside community members from different backgrounds, they demonstrate the values we teach at school, inspiring others to follow suit."

The integration of religious moderation into the curriculum and extracurricular activities has had a profound impact on student character development. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, students are now more reflective and thoughtful in their interactions. One teacher highlighted this transformation:

"We see students stepping up as leaders during group activities, ensuring everyone is included and respected. It reflects the values of moderation and equality we emphasize."

At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, students have become more proactive in addressing peer conflicts or misunderstandings. A student shared:

"When there's a disagreement, we discuss it calmly and try to understand each other's perspective. Our teachers always remind us that being kind and respectful is more important than being right."

Both schools have successfully used religious moderation to counter radical ideologies and promote national unity. By emphasizing the values of Pancasila and respect for diversity, the principals have created a bulwark against the potential infiltration of extreme ideologies. The principal at SD Kristen Rantepao 5 remarked:

"Religious moderation is not just a school program; it's a national responsibility. We safeguard our future as a harmonious society by teaching our students to value unity and tolerance."

Teachers at SD Negeri 1 Rantepao noted that this approach has equipped students with critical thinking skills to question divisive narratives. One teacher explained:

"Our students are now more confident in rejecting ideas that contradict the values of tolerance and mutual respect. They know that being patriotic means embracing diversity."

The efforts of the principals at SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao in promoting religious moderation have had far-reaching impacts, fostering a culture of tolerance, reducing prejudice, and strengthening community engagement. By embedding these values into every aspect of school life, from curriculum design to extracurricular activities, the schools have created environments where diversity is celebrated and unity is prioritized. The principals' leadership serves as a model for other educational institutions aiming to instil the values of religious moderation in their students and communities.

Discussion

The Role of Principals as Drivers of Religious Moderation in Elementary Schools

This study's findings emphasize the principals' pivotal role in fostering religious moderation within elementary schools, particularly in multicultural and religiously

diverse contexts. By integrating principles of moderation into the school ethos, curriculum, and extracurricular activities, the principals of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao effectively demonstrate how leadership can shape a culture of tolerance and inclusivity.

The ethical leadership of these principals serves as a cornerstone for promoting religious moderation. They model fairness, respect, and inclusivity in their daily interactions and decision-making processes (La Fors, 2024; Starke et al., 2022). For example, the principal of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 consistently emphasized respect for diverse beliefs, creating an environment where trust and mutual respect flourished among students, teachers, and the wider community. This ethical approach aligns with transformational leadership theories, highlighting the leader's role in inspiring and motivating others to work towards collective goals (Kwan, 2019; Lai et al., 2020).

An important aspect of this leadership is the integration of religious moderation into the schools' vision and mission (Islamy, 2021; Muhsin & Kususiyanah, 2024; Nazilah et al., 2024). At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal embedded these values into the school's vision, which aims to foster Christian character while promoting environmental care and nationalistic values. This approach underscores the importance of embedding ethical principles into organizational goals to influence behaviour and attitudes (Bilderback, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2024). Similarly, SD Negeri 1 Rantepao integrates character education and the principles of "5S" (smile, greeting, respect, politeness, and courtesy) into its mission, promoting harmony and respect.

The principals also use the curriculum as a tool for promoting religious moderation. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, Pancasila values are integrated into lessons to instil an understanding of coexistence and mutual respect. At SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, the curriculum emphasizes cooperation, equality, and tolerance, providing students with a framework to appreciate diversity. These strategies reflect that curriculum innovation is a critical pathway for systemic change in educational institutions (Gregersen-Hermans, 2021; Straub & Vilsmaier, 2020).

The principals' leadership styles further enhance the implementation of religious moderation (Hulawa et al., 2024; Mala & Hunaida, 2023; Malla et al., 2023). At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal adopts a democratic leadership style, fostering open dialogue and participatory decision-making. This approach encourages collaboration and inclusivity within the school (Phillips et al., 2024; Puspitadani et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2024). Conversely, the principal of SD Negeri 1 Rantepao exhibits charismatic leadership, inspiring teachers and students through personal influence and vision. Both styles demonstrate the importance of aligning leadership strategies with organizational needs to achieve shared goals (Blokland & Reniers, 2021; Díez et al., 2020).

Despite their successes, the principals faced challenges in implementing religious moderation initiatives. For instance, at SD Kristen Rantepao 5, some teachers initially resisted interfaith activities, perceiving them as a threat to their religious identity. The principal addressed this resistance through open discussions and clear communication, gradually building trust and understanding (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Heenan & Lafferty, 2024). Similarly, at SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, resistance to interfaith community service projects was mitigated through persistent dialogue and gradual exposure. These

strategies illustrate the importance of adaptive leadership in overcoming resistance and fostering a shared vision (Chughtai et al., 2023; Santra & Alat, 2022).

Lastly, the study highlights the influence of contextual factors on the principals' roles. Toraja's cultural and religious landscape, characterized by interfaith harmony, provided a supportive backdrop for implementing moderation initiatives. The principals' ability to contextualize these values within their respective school environments underscores their strategic and cultural competencies, enabling them to create inclusive and tolerant educational settings (Aruman et al., 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Leithwood, 2021).

Efforts of Principals in Driving Religious Moderation

The efforts of principals in driving religious moderation in elementary schools demonstrate the critical role of leadership in cultivating an inclusive and harmonious school environment. This study highlights how the principals of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao actively implement strategies to promote religious moderation through curriculum integration, extracurricular programs, and participatory leadership approaches.

One key effort observed is integrating religious moderation values into the school curriculum. Both schools ensure that religious tolerance, respect for diversity, and national unity are incorporated into lessons. For example, at SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal embeds Pancasila values and moral education into daily teaching. Similarly, SD Negeri 1 Rantepao integrates equality, respect, and harmony values into classroom discussions and projects. This strategic incorporation aligns with theories of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire change through vision and innovation in organizational practices (Philip, 2021; Saad Alessa, 2021).

The principals also leverage extracurricular activities to foster moderation among students. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, interfaith dialogue and community service projects are designed to encourage students to interact and collaborate across religious boundaries. These activities create opportunities for students to practice tolerance and mutual respect in real-life settings (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Riaz et al., 2023). Likewise, SD Negeri 1 Rantepao organizes events like cultural celebrations and interfaith cleanup drives, providing practical experiences of harmoniously living in a pluralistic society. These efforts resonate with experiential learning, emphasizing learning through action and reflection (Manalu, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2024).

Leadership style is another critical aspect of the principals' efforts. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal employs a participatory approach involving teachers, staff, and students in planning and implementing programs. This democratic leadership style fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for promoting religious moderation (Gilani et al., 2022; Grošelj et al., 2021). In contrast, the principal of SD Negeri 1 Rantepao utilizes a more directive yet inclusive approach, emphasizing clarity of goals and consistent communication. Both approaches reflect adaptive leadership, where leaders align their strategies with their organization's needs and challenges (Chughtai et al., 2023; Pak et al., 2020).

The study also highlights the principals' commitment to creating inclusive policies and practices. For instance, at SD Kristen Rantepao 5, the principal ensures that all

school events and policies are sensitive to the diverse religious backgrounds of students and staff. Similarly, SD Negeri 1 Rantepao adopts a "LISA CANTIK" (Look, Pick, Smile, Appreciate) initiative, encouraging students to practice care, tolerance, and cooperation in daily interactions. These policies reinforce the schools' missions to foster environments that respect and celebrate diversity (Rahayu et al., 2024; Wilcoxon et al., 2021).

Challenges in promoting religious moderation were also evident, particularly in addressing resistance from teachers and parents. At SD Kristen Rantepao 5, some staff initially viewed interfaith initiatives as compromising their religious beliefs. The principal addressed this by engaging in open dialogue, clarifying the purpose of these programs, and demonstrating their alignment with shared values of humanity and mutual respect. Similarly, at SD Negeri 1 Rantepao, the principal faced scepticism about the feasibility of integrating religious moderation into the curriculum. These doubts were gradually alleviated through consistent communication and evidence of successful practices (Leithwood, 2021; Phillips et al., 2024).

The findings reveal that the principals' efforts go beyond administrative tasks to actively shaping the values and culture of their schools. The principals play a transformative role in their institutions by integrating religious moderation into academic and extracurricular activities, engaging stakeholders in participatory planning, and addressing challenges with persistence and adaptability. Their efforts foster inclusive school environments and contribute to broader societal goals of promoting peace and coexistence in a diverse community.

Impact of Principals' Efforts on Religious Moderation

The findings reveal the profound and multifaceted impact of principals' efforts in promoting religious moderation within elementary schools. Principals of SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao have shown how leadership can drive inclusivity, harmony, and the adoption of shared values across diverse communities. The principals have successfully established an environment that celebrates diversity and promotes inclusivity. Both schools reflect a climate where religious moderation is taught and practised daily. By embedding the principles of religious moderation into school culture, the schools have created spaces where students, regardless of their religious backgrounds, feel valued and respected (Nazilah et al., 2024)(Khalilurrahman et al., 2023). It aligns with transformational leadership practices, where leaders inspire and unite individuals under a shared vision, creating an inclusive and collaborative atmosphere (Lo et al., 2020; Rojak et al., 2024).

Integrating religious moderation into educational and extracurricular activities has significantly contributed to students' social and emotional development. These activities allow students to engage with diverse perspectives and experiences, enhancing their empathy and interpersonal skills (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Muliadi et al., 2024). The emphasis on understanding and respecting differences has nurtured students' abilities to navigate complex social dynamics effectively, preparing them for a pluralistic society (Mariyono, 2024; Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). This finding supports the importance of experiential learning, which emphasizes action and reflection as key components of student growth.

The leadership efforts of the principals have played a crucial role in mitigating potential conflicts and preventing the spread of extremist ideologies. By fostering mutual understanding and respect among students, these schools have become models of peaceful coexistence (Setiawan, 2024; Tanyel & Kıralp, 2021). The emphasis on moderation, tolerance, and open-mindedness directly addresses societal challenges such as radicalism and discrimination, positioning the schools as proactive agents in promoting harmony (Farida et al., 2024; Nurul Hidayati et al., 2023).

The principals' efforts have also strengthened relationships among school stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and the wider community. The principals have fostered a sense of shared responsibility and ownership through participatory planning and transparent communication. This inclusive leadership approach has motivated teachers and staff and encouraged parents to support the schools' initiatives actively. Such practices align with servant leadership principles, emphasizing collaboration and community needs prioritization (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Kainde & Mandagi, 2023; Nauman et al., 2021).

Despite these achievements, the journey toward religious moderation was not without challenges. Resistance from certain stakeholders, including initial misunderstandings about the objectives of religious moderation, posed obstacles. However, the principals demonstrated resilience by addressing concerns through clear communication, empathy, and consistent engagement. Their ability to overcome these barriers reflects the adaptability and perseverance essential for impactful leadership (Christopher Day et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Lazaridou, 2021).

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of elementary school principals as drivers of religious moderation in creating inclusive and harmonious educational environments. Principals at SD Kristen Rantepao 5 and SD Negeri 1 Rantepao demonstrated leadership styles—ranging from democratic to charismatic—that successfully embedded values of tolerance, mutual respect, and diversity into school visions, missions, and daily practices. Their efforts included integrating moderation values into curricula, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and implementing experiential learning activities to promote student empathy and inclusivity. These initiatives had transformative impacts, including enhanced social awareness, mitigating conflicts, preventing extremist ideologies, and strengthening relationships with school stakeholders. Despite initial resistance from some parties, the principals' resilience, participatory approaches, and strategic communication overcame challenges, ensuring the sustainability of their initiatives. This research underscores the importance of visionary and inclusive leadership in promoting religious moderation and fostering coexistence in diverse educational contexts.

Declaration of conflicting interest

Locus anonymity should be guaranteed, as the test result may be used inappropriately by irresponsible party(es).

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