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Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Policy in Indonesia's Independent Curriculum: A Multicultural Perspective

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Abstract

The implementation of the Indonesian Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) has reshaped Islamic Religious Education (PAI) by promoting learner-centered learning and the integration of multicultural values. Previous studies have largely viewed policy implementation as a linear process, with limited attention to how educational actors interpret and adapt the policy within diverse school contexts. This study aims to examine the implementation of the PAI policy within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum through the lens of policy implementation theory and a multicultural education perspective. A qualitative policy analysis was conducted in six high schools in Central Java, Indonesia, involving 61 participants, including PAI teachers, principals, vice principals for curriculum, curriculum coordinators, supervisors, and educational policy stakeholders selected through sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using an interactive model of data reduction, data display, and inference, supported by NVivo 12 Plus for thematic coding. Findings indicate that policy implementation is shaped by teachers' professional judgment, institutional context, resource availability, and diverse learner backgrounds. Rather than being implemented uniformly, curriculum policies are selectively interpreted and adapted to suit local school conditions. Teachers promote multicultural values through learning strategies that foster tolerance, respect for diversity, religious moderation, and intercultural dialogue while reinforcing the Pancasila Student Profile. Despite greater curriculum flexibility, tensions remain regarding assessment practices, pedagogical autonomy, and balancing Islamic Religious Education traditions with the needs of multicultural learning. This study demonstrates that curriculum policy implementation is a context-dependent and socially negotiated process, providing empirical evidence to

strengthen multicultural-oriented Islamic Religious Education and informing more inclusive curriculum policies and practices in Indonesia.

Keywords: Curriculum Policy; Independent Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; Multicultural Education; Policy Implementation

1. Introduction

Curriculum reform through the Independent Curriculum marks a significant shift in Indonesia's national education policy, emphasizing learning flexibility, teacher pedagogical autonomy, learning differentiation, and the development of student competencies and character. This reform is expected to not only change curriculum documents but also transform classroom learning practices to be more contextual, inclusive, and student-centered. Various studies have shown that changes in policy design do not automatically result in changes in learning practices. The implementation of curriculum policies is often influenced by teachers' professional capacity, school leadership, organizational culture, resource availability, and students' socio-cultural characteristics, resulting in variations in practices across schools (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Hill & Hupe, 2021). Various studies on the implementation of the Independent Curriculum indicate that teachers still face challenges in interpreting the new policy, developing differentiated learning, integrating the Pancasila Student Profile, and balancing administrative demands with pedagogical innovation (Hasballah & Zulfatmi, 2024; OECD, 2023; Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024). These findings suggest that the success of curriculum reform is determined not only by the quality of policy design, but by how the policy is understood, negotiated, and realized in everyday learning practices.

This research is theoretically based on a framework *policy enactment* developed by Ball, which views policy as a social practice shaped by material, discursive, and professional contexts. This framework is enriched with the perspective of *multi-level governance* from Hill and Hupe (2014), emphasizes that education policy operates at various national, institutional, and classroom levels that interact non-linearly. In addition, the approach *complexity and public policy* From Cairney (2012; 2020), it is used to understand curriculum policy as a dynamic, uncertain process, and prone to oversimplification in policy design. The integration of these three frameworks allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between policy design, school context, and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning practices.

Research on the Indonesian Independent Curriculum and curriculum reform has grown rapidly over the past decade. Existing studies largely examine curriculum implementation from the perspective of teacher readiness, implementation fidelity, pedagogical innovation, curriculum evaluation, or student learning outcomes (Suharto et al., 2019; Suyanto & Widodo, 2013; Rahman, 2022). These studies consistently report that the success of curriculum reform depends on teachers' professional competence, institutional support, and school leadership, but they generally conceptualize implementation as a process of policy compliance or instructional adaptation rather than as an interpretive process in which teachers actively construct the meaning of the policy (Fullan, 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; Liu et al., 2026). Bagdžiūnienė et al. (2022); Liu et al. (2026); Birani-Nasraldin et al. (2026) investigate how policy is reconstructed in everyday interactions in culturally diverse classrooms.

Huda (2018); Itsnatun & Diantoro (2021), emphasize aspects of material substance, strengthening religious character, or the effectiveness of learning methods, assuming that curriculum policies are practiced relatively uniformly at the school level. Research on *religious education reform*often focus on *outcomes* While there has been little attention paid to learning or normative debates regarding the role of religion in schools, the classroom-level policy process has received less attention (Gearon, 2014; Jackson, 2019; Dwiyono & Tannarong, 2024). These studies consistently report that Islamic Religious Education teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward curriculum reform but continue to experience difficulties in designing differentiated learning, integrating multicultural values, and aligning assessment practices with the new curriculum framework. Institutional support, collaborative professional learning, and contextual school leadership have been identified as critical enabling factors for successful implementation (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

In the field of religious education, empirical studies have primarily focused on religious moderation, character education, curriculum content, teaching effectiveness, and students' moral development (Jackson, 2019; Franck, 2022; Gearon, 2013). While these studies provide valuable insights into the goals of religious education, they generally assume that curriculum policies are implemented relatively consistently across schools. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to the processes by which teachers interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct curriculum policies in response to institutional contexts, professional identities, and students' diverse religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. Similarly, recent studies on multicultural education emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive learning environments, and intercultural competence (Banks, 2021; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021), yet these perspectives are rarely integrated into curriculum policy research or policy implementation studies.

These limitations become particularly evident when comparing three major streams of international research. The first stream investigates curriculum reform and the role of teachers, demonstrating that teachers exercise considerable professional judgment in responding to curriculum change (Priestley et al., 2015; Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2026). The second stream examines policy implementation and educational governance, highlighting that policies are mediated through institutional contexts and organizational conditions rather than being implemented uniformly (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2015; Hill & Hupe, 2021; Spillane et al., 2002). The third stream focuses on multicultural and religious education, emphasizing inclusive pedagogy, intercultural dialogue, and religious moderation in increasingly pluralistic societies (Banks, 2021; Jackson, 2019; Franck, 2022). Despite their respective contributions, these three areas of literature have largely evolved significantly. Only a few studies integrate curriculum policy implementation, multi-level governance, instructional leadership, and multicultural education to explain how Islamic Religious Education teachers negotiate curriculum reform in culturally diverse classrooms.

Academically, this research contributes to the enrichment of educational policy studies, curriculum studies, and multicultural education by presenting an empirical analysis of *enactment* policy in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, a field that is still relatively limited in both national and international literature. This research broadens understanding of how curriculum policy is not only translated into pedagogical practice but also becomes a means to develop values of inclusivity, tolerance, respect for diversity, and intercultural competence. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide policymakers with a more comprehensive

understanding of how the Independent Curriculum in*enactment* in diverse social and cultural contexts, while also offering a reflective basis for teachers and schools in developing Islamic Religious Education learning that is responsive to the diversity of learners without neglecting local contexts and pedagogical professionalism. This research not only contributes to the development of theory but also contributes to the development of Islamic Religious Education *enactment* policy, but offers a critical perspective to strengthen the formulation and implementation of curriculum policies that are more inclusive, contextual, and oriented towards strengthening multicultural education.

2. Literature Review

Existing studies have yielded important insights regarding curriculum reform, teacher preparedness, and religious education. However, important limitations remain: most studies conceptualize curriculum implementation primarily as adherence to policy, emphasizing teacher preparedness, instructional adaptation, curriculum fidelity, or learning outcomes, rather than examining how policy is actively interpreted and reconstructed during classroom practice (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2015; Hill & Hupe, 2021). While these studies have contributed to understanding the operational challenges of curriculum reform, they have paid less attention to the role of teachers in shaping policy implementation through their professional judgment and contextual decision-making (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

Research rarely integrates policy implementation theory with multi-level governance and complexity perspectives, even though curriculum reform operates at multiple, interconnected policy levels involving national policymakers, local education authorities, school leadership, curriculum coordinators, and classroom teachers. Existing studies generally analyze these dimensions separately, resulting in fragmented explanations of curriculum implementation. Consequently, the dynamic interactions between policy design, institutional governance, organizational culture, leadership practices, and classroom pedagogy remain under-theorized (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Cairney, 2020). Without such an integrated perspective, it is difficult to explain why the same curriculum policy is implemented differently across schools, classrooms, and educational contexts.

Perspective *complexity in public policy* developed by Cairney (2012, 2020), strengthens the understanding that curriculum policy is a series of decisions that are dynamic, non-linear, and sometimes result in unplanned consequences *(unintended consequences)*. In this regard, curriculum reform shows that changes in curriculum structure often give rise to problems in learning practices, such as inconsistencies in assessment procedures, tensions between the demands of the new curriculum and existing educational practices, and the need for teachers to engage in pedagogical improvisation (Hasballah & Zulfatmi, 2024). These findings reinforce the point that policy cannot be understood solely as a formal document but must be analyzed as an adaptive and contextual practice. Curriculum changes often fail to create consistent changes in learning practices in the classroom due to the dilemma between formal design and local school conditions (Itsnatun & Diantoro, 2021; Manshur & Isroani, 2023; Hasbullah, 2015; Tilaar, 2012), thus raising the need to understand policy as a dynamic social practice.

To address these limitations, this study develops an integrated analytical framework by combining Policy Implementation Theory (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2015), Multilevel Governance (Hill & Hupe, 2021), Complexity Theory in Public Policy (Cairney, 2012, 2020), and

Multicultural Education (Banks, 2021). Rather than viewing curriculum implementation as a linear administrative process, this framework conceptualizes policy as a socially negotiated practice that is continuously interpreted, adapted, and reconstructed through interactions between policy texts, institutional structures, teacher roles, and multicultural classroom contexts. Policy Implementation Theory explains how teachers interpret and translate curriculum policies into pedagogical practices; Multilevel Governance clarifies how policy decisions at the national, institutional, and classroom levels shape implementation; Complexity Theory explains the adaptive, nonlinear, and context-dependent nature of the policy process; and Multicultural Education provides a normative and pedagogical lens for understanding how inclusivity, religious moderation, intercultural dialogue, and respect for diversity are embedded in Islamic Religious Education.

Therefore, this study positions the classroom as the primary unit of analysis where curriculum policies are not only implemented but also realized through ongoing interactions between educational actors, institutional contexts, and diverse learner identities. By integrating these four theoretical perspectives, this study goes beyond conventional implementation studies to explain how curriculum policies are interpreted, negotiated, and transformed into multicultural pedagogical practices. Thus, this study contributes to expanding the literature on curriculum policy, Islamic Religious Education (PAI), and multicultural education by offering an integrated explanation of the policy's embodiment in the Indonesian Independent Curriculum.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with policy analysis to examine how the Independent Curriculum policy in*enactment* in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning practices in high schools. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the contemporary policy perspectives of Muhaimin (2015); Nata (2020), who view education policy not as a technocratic instrument implemented linearly, but rather as a social process interpreted, mediated, and negotiated by educational actors in specific contexts (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Hill & Hupe, 2021). *Enactment* Policy analysis is understood as a dynamic process that occurs through the interaction between policy demands, school institutional conditions, teacher professionalism, and the diverse characteristics of students. The classroom is positioned as the primary arena for policy analysis, where policy meets pedagogical practice and serves as a space for social and cultural interaction that reflects the values of multicultural education. Through this perspective, the research not only examines how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers translate the Independent Curriculum policy into learning, but also how they integrate the values of inclusivity, tolerance, religious moderation, respect for diversity, and intercultural competence into daily learning practices.

3.1. Research Context and Informants

This study involved 61 participants, consisting of Islamic Religious Education teachers, principals, vice principals for curriculum, curriculum coordinators, Islamic Religious Education supervisors, education officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, P5 teachers, community representatives, and students from six high schools in Central Java. The selection of research locations was carried out randomly *purposive sampling* (Braun et al., 2015), taking into account variations in school characteristics, such as school status, students' social background, and the school's level of experience in implementing national curriculum policies. Research informants included Islamic Religious Education teachers as key actors in the process *enactment* policies, school principals as institutional actors, and curriculum policy documents at the national and

school levels. The primary focus of the analysis is directed at Islamic Religious Education teachers because they are at the intersection of policy design and classroom learning practices.

3.2. Data Collection Technique

Data were collected between January 2024 and May 2025 using three complementary techniques: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. This combination of methods enabled methodological triangulation and provided a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policies are implemented within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) across various institutional contexts. This research was conducted in six high schools to examine how curriculum policies are translated into daily teaching practices. Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, teaching strategies, classroom management, integration of multicultural values, learning differentiation, religious moderation, assessment practices, and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile. Field notes were systematically recorded using an observation protocol to capture both planned teaching activities and spontaneous classroom interactions.

The interview process followed several sequential steps. First, official permission was obtained from the education authorities and participating schools. Second, potential participants were identified through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in curriculum implementation. Third, an interview schedule was arranged according to participant availability. Fourth, each participant received an explanation of the research objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent before the interview began. Fifth, interviews were conducted individually using a semi-structured interview guide that allowed the researcher to explore emerging issues while maintaining consistency across participants. Interviews focused on participants' interpretations of curriculum policies, experiences implementing the Independent Curriculum, professional decision-making, institutional support, challenges encountered during implementation, and strategies for fostering an inclusive and multicultural learning environment. Follow-up questions were used whenever clarification or further explanation was needed. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Interviews focused on teachers' experiences, strategies, challenges, and professional considerations in building inclusive and responsive learning environments to student diversity. Document analysis included 12 national policy documents. The Independent Curriculum and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are regulated, along with 42 school-level documents. Data were collected from six high schools. The school-level documents consist of the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP), the Learning Objectives Flow (ATP) document, and the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching module. assessment packages, lesson plans/teaching tools, and monitoring and evaluation reports, along with documentation of school-based religious character development programs from six schools. These documents were treated as policy texts and analyzed to examine how the principles of the Independent Curriculum, the Pancasila Student Profile, and multicultural education are represented in formal policy documents and then translated into planning, classroom teaching, and assessment practices.

3.3. Data Analysis Techniques and Procedures

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion

drawing and verification. The analytical process was iterative and occurred concurrently with data collection to allow for ongoing comparison across observations, interviews, and documentary evidence. At this stage, all interview transcripts, observational field notes, and documentary materials were imported into NVivo 12 Plus. Open coding was initially conducted to identify meaningful units related to policy interpretation, teacher roles, institutional context, multicultural pedagogical practices, curriculum implementation, assessment, and professional decision-making. Similar codes were then grouped into broader analytical categories through constant comparison across data sources. This stage involved organizing the coded data into thematic matrices, conceptual maps, and coding hierarchies to facilitate comparisons across schools and participant groups. Particular attention was paid to identifying relationships between policy texts, institutional contexts, teacher interpretations, and classroom practices to explain variations in policy implementation across school settings.

During conclusion drawing and verification, emerging themes were continuously compared with empirical evidence from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Interpretations were refined through triangulation across multiple data sources and participant groups while being examined against theoretical perspectives of Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education. This iterative process strengthened the credibility and analytical consistency of the findings. NVivo 12 Plus, Bazeley & Jackson (2013), was used to support systematic data management, coding, thematic analysis, visualization of relationships between categories, and retrieval of supporting evidence. This software enhances the transparency, auditability, and methodological rigor of qualitative policy analysis by enabling the systematic organization of large amounts of qualitative data and maintaining a clear analytical flow throughout the research process.

3.4. Data Validation

To ensure the validation and methodological rigor of this study, several strategies were implemented, following the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985). This research was structured through methodological triangulation by integrating data from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The use of multiple participant groups, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, principals, vice principals for curriculum, curriculum coordinators, supervisors, education officials, and other relevant stakeholders, enabled triangulation across perspectives and institutional levels. Data from these sources were continuously compared throughout the analytical process to identify convergences, divergences, and complementary evidence regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum policy. This research was conducted by returning interview summaries and initial interpretations to selected participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives. Feedback received from participants was incorporated into the final analysis whenever clarification or refinement was needed.

This process was conducted through regular discussions with academic advisors and colleagues experienced in qualitative education policy research. These discussions focused on reviewing coding decisions, thematic categorization, interpretation of findings, and alignment between empirical evidence and the theoretical framework. This process minimized researcher bias and strengthened the consistency of analytical interpretation. The use of NVivo 12 Plus further enhanced analytical transparency by preserving coding structure, thematic relationships, query

output, and data retrieval history, allowing for systematic tracking and review of the analytical process.

Throughout the study, the researcher made analytical notes to distinguish empirical findings from personal assumptions and theoretical expectations. Decisions made during coding and interpretation were consistently based on evidence obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, the inclusion of six high schools representing different institutional contexts and diverse categories of educational stakeholders provides rich contextual evidence that enhances the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings implementing the Indonesian Independent Curriculum.

4. Results

The findings are presented based on key themes that directly relate to the objectives of this study and its theoretical framework. The first theme examines how teachers interpret Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policies in the Indonesian Independent Curriculum, highlighting how policy texts are understood and reconstructed through teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs. The second theme explores how curriculum policies are mediated through institutional contexts, emphasizing the roles of school leadership, curriculum coordination, organizational culture, and resource availability in shaping policy implementation across diverse educational settings. The third theme focuses on the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policies in multicultural classrooms by examining how teachers translate curriculum expectations into pedagogical practices that promote religious moderation, respect for diversity, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive learning. The fourth theme analyzes the complexity of curriculum policy implementation by describing how teachers continually negotiate tensions between curriculum requirements, pedagogical autonomy, assessment practices, institutional expectations, and the diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of their students.

The findings are grouped into four interrelated themes derived from thematic analysis and grounded in an integrated analytical framework comprising Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education. Data from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis were integrated into the analysis, while NVivo 12 Plus facilitated the identification of dominant themes, relationships between categories, and patterns of policy implementation across the six participating schools. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policies within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka Indonesia) is not a simple process of policy compliance, but rather a dynamic and context-dependent process of interpretation, mediation, negotiation, and adaptation. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the view that curriculum policies are socially realized through interactions among educational actors, institutional contexts, and multicultural classroom realities, consistent with the perspectives of Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education.

4.1. Interpretation of Independent Curriculum Texts and Ideas in Islamic Religious Education Learning

The policy interpretations identified in this theme emerge from evidence generated from six participating high schools and are based on classroom observations, semi-structured interviews,

and document analysis involving 61 participants. Classroom observations provided direct evidence of how teachers interpret and translate curriculum policies into pedagogical practices, while interviews with principals, curriculum coordinators, supervisors, education officials, and other stakeholders allowed for triangulation of teachers' interpretations within broader institutional and policy contexts. Findings regarding teachers' pragmatic interpretations of the principles of curriculum flexibility and autonomy indicate that curriculum policies are often interpreted by teachers as new administrative demands rather than substantive pedagogical changes (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2022; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). A similar pattern is demonstrated by research by Mulyasa (2021) and Suyanto & Jihad (2013), which assert that teachers tend to understand curriculum change through the lens of established pedagogical routines. The dominance of lecture methods and cognitive assessments found through classroom observations confirms the argument that classroom practices often reproduce *pedagogical continuity* Despite changes in formal policy (Cuban, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), this continuity in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is influenced by the subject's normative orientation, which prioritizes mastery of material and values (Muhaimin, 2015; Tilaar, 2012). As revealed in an interview with an Islamic Religious Education teacher:

> "*If you call it independence, yes, there is some flexibility. But in practice, we still adapt to the format of the teaching modules and reports requested by the schools*." (Interview G1)

This statement is supported by the analysis of learning documents. Although schools have adopted the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) teaching modules, the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning structure and objectives still show strong continuity with the previous curriculum. The focus on mastering conceptual material remains dominant, while learning differentiation has not been operationally articulated in lesson plans.

4.2. *Enactment* Multicultural Values in Islamic Education Learning

The results of the study show that *enactment* The Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not only oriented toward achieving academic and spiritual competencies, but also toward strengthening multicultural values. Teachers integrate the values of tolerance, respect for differences, justice, and peaceful coexistence through the selection of materials, the use of contextual case studies, and discussions on social issues relevant to students' lives. In learning practice, these values are not taught merely as normative concepts but are contextualized through students' social experiences living in diverse communities. These findings indicate that *enactment* The policy is taking place alongside the process of recontextualizing multicultural values into religious learning practices. One principal stated:

> "*We give teachers freedom, but there are still school standards so that learning can be controlled*." (KS1 Interview)

This statement demonstrates the school's role as a policy mediator. Analysis of school documents, such as the Independent Curriculum implementation guidelines and teacher meeting minutes, shows that schools function as mediating spaces, balancing national policy demands with teacher preparedness, student characteristics, and institutional capacity. Observations indicate that this mediation process produces variation *enactment* Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, particularly in integrating multicultural values, religious moderation, and respect for diversity. Schools with collaborative cultures and leadership that supports pedagogical innovation tend to develop learning that is more inclusive, dialogic, and responsive to student diversity, while

schools that are more oriented toward administrative compliance demonstrate more normative practices (Birani-Nasraldin et al. 2026).

Variations *enactment* inter-school policies influenced by leadership and internal school policies strengthen the approach *multi-level governance* which emphasizes the role of local institutions as an arena for policy mediation (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Honig, 2006). Several studies have shown that school principals and school management play a role as *policy brokers* which determines how policies are translated into classroom practice (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). This finding aligns with research highlighting the role of school culture and educational leadership in determining the success of curriculum reform (Tilaar & Nugroho, 2012; Dwiyono & Tannarong, 2024). Thus, the Independent Curriculum policy cannot be understood solely as a national design, but rather as the result of complex interactions between policy levels.

This finding broadens the discourse *policy enactment* by showing that the interpretation of policies in Islamic Religious Education learning is influenced by the normative orientation of the subject which emphasizes the formation of values and character. This orientation forms *interpretive frame* which influences how teachers translate the principles of flexibility and autonomy of the Independent Curriculum. Research findings indicate that the normative values of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) serve as a foundation for integrating tolerance, religious moderation, and respect for diversity into learning. *Enactment* policy is of a nature *subject-sensitive* and needs to be understood through the interaction between policy texts, subject characteristics, and the professional context of teachers in developing inclusive and responsive learning to diversity.

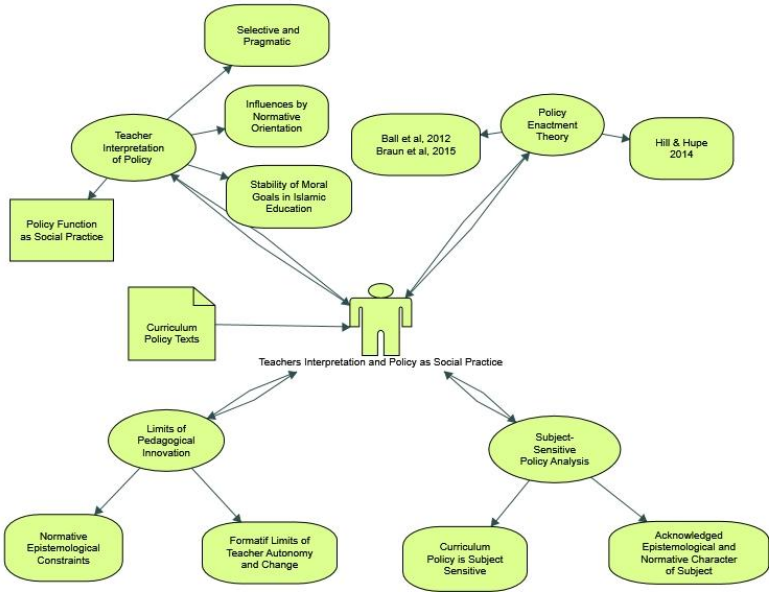


Figure 1: Concept Map Teacher Interpretation and Policy as Social Practice

Concept Map: This map demonstrates that Islamic Religious Education teachers' interpretation of the Independent Curriculum policy takes place as a social practice shaped by the interaction between the policy text, the normative orientation of the subject, and the teachers' professional context. The principles of curriculum flexibility and autonomy are interpreted

selectively and pragmatically because the goal of forming values, morals, and character in Islamic Religious Education serves as an interpretive framework that influences the direction of learning change. In this process, teachers not only translate policy demands into pedagogical practice but also recontextualize the values of tolerance, religious moderation, inclusivity, and respect for diversity according to the characteristics of the students. This map confirms that *enactment* policy cannot be understood solely as a matter of compliance with curriculum documents, but rather as a process *subject-sensitive* which is influenced by the epistemological and normative character of the subject. Therefore, variations *enactment* Policy is a consequence of how teachers interpret and actualize policies in learning practices that are responsive to diversity in the classroom.

4.3. Islamic Education Teachers' Strategies in Managing Diversity and Building Intercultural Dialogue

The research findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education teachers' strategies for managing student diversity are shaped through a continuous negotiation process between the demands of the Independent Curriculum, teacher professionalism, and students' socio-cultural characteristics. Interview data demonstrates that teachers strive to develop learning that not only strengthens religious understanding but also fosters tolerance, mutual respect, and openness to differences. To achieve these goals, teachers employ various strategies, such as group discussions, case-based learning, reflection on student experiences, and dialogue on diversity issues relevant to everyday life. Teachers face challenges in balancing the delivery of normative religious material with the need to create a dialogue space that is inclusive and responsive to diversity. These findings suggest that *enactment* The Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not only concerned with the implementation of curriculum policies, but also with teachers' abilities to mediate differences and build intercultural competencies as part of classroom learning practices. An Islamic Religious Education teacher explained:

> "*PAI values cannot be completely adapted to new models. Some aspects must still be conveyed in a classical manner to maintain their meaning*." (G3 Interview)

This statement demonstrates teachers' efforts to balance the substance of religious teachings with the demands of the Independent Curriculum, which encourages more participatory and inclusive learning. Observations indicate that teachers adopt approaches such as group discussions and project-based learning to open up dialogue about diversity, while maintaining a structured delivery of material on religious topics considered fundamental. Analysis of assessment documents indicates that although cognitive assessments remain dominant, some teachers are beginning to develop reflective assessments that emphasize tolerance, respect for differences, and religious moderation. These findings suggest that teachers' strategies for managing diversity are implemented through pedagogical adaptations that combine the reinforcement of religious values with intercultural dialogue and more inclusive learning. *Concept Map* The following map visualizes the relationship between national policies, school policies, and classroom practices that shape teachers' strategies in managing student diversity. This map shows that intercultural dialogue and inclusive learning are the result of this process *enactment* policies mediated by the institutional and professional context of teachers in a nonlinear and contextual manner.

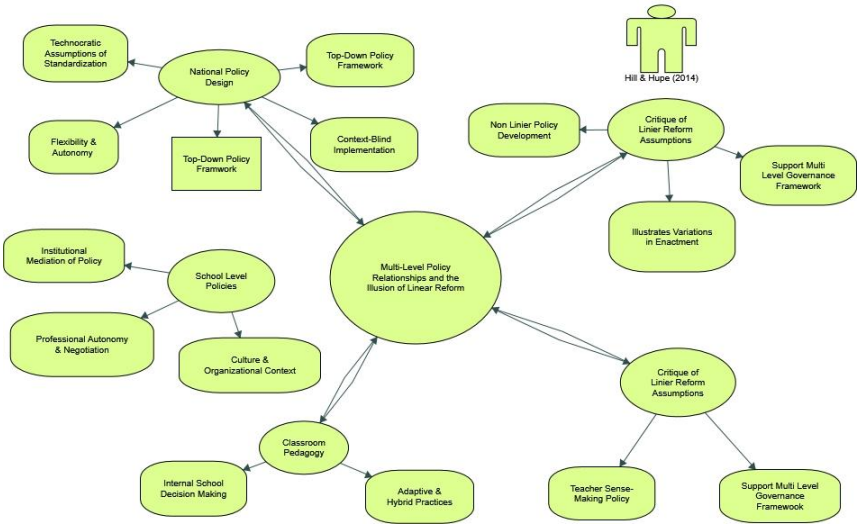


Figure 1: *Concept Map* Interlevel Relations of Policy and the Illusion of Linearity of Reform

Concept Map This explains that the strategies of Islamic Education teachers in managing student diversity and building intercultural dialogue are not formed directly from the design of national policies. *Enactment* The Independent Curriculum is mediated by school policies, organizational culture, leadership, and teacher professional autonomy, allowing for adaptation to local contexts. This process results in diverse learning practices, including the development of dialogic, collaborative, and contextual learning that fosters tolerance and appreciation of differences. These findings confirm the perspective *multi-level governance* (Hill & Hupe, 2021), that educational policy is a process that is negotiated at various levels, so that variations in learning practices are a natural consequence of teachers' efforts to respond to the diversity of students and school needs.

Project Map used to show a more detailed flow and relationship between the processes of interpretation, mediation, and policy negotiation in *enactment* Independent Curriculum in Islamic Education learning in the classroom.

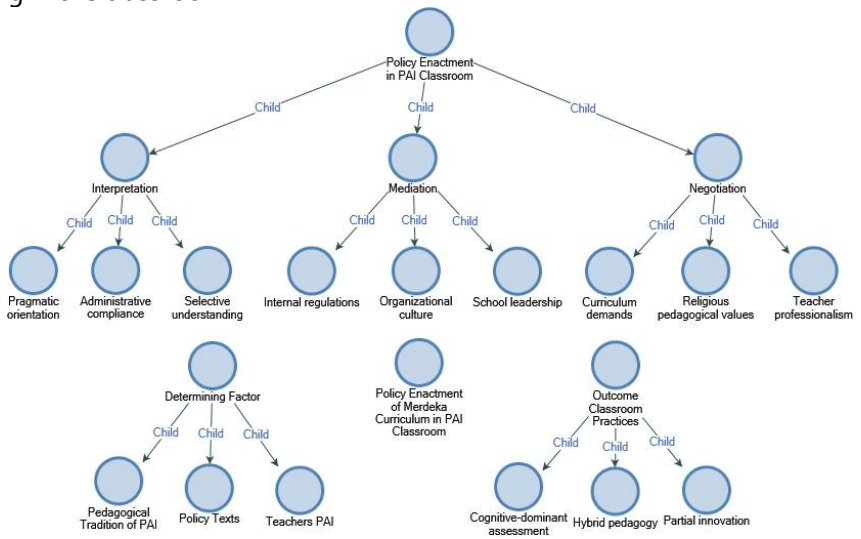


Figure 3: *Project Map* Dynamics of Policy Interpretation, Mediation, and Negotiation in the Classroom

Project Map Figure 3 shows that *enactment* The Independent Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning takes place through three interrelated processes: interpretation, mediation, and policy negotiation. The interpretation process demonstrates how teachers interpret policy texts pragmatically and selectively according to the learning needs and characteristics of students. The mediation process illustrates the role of internal regulations, organizational culture, and school leadership in filtering and contextualizing policies. Meanwhile, the negotiation process demonstrates teachers' efforts to balance the demands of the Independent Curriculum with religious pedagogical values, teacher professionalism, and the need to build inclusive and responsive learning to student diversity.

These findings indicate that *enactment* The Independent Curriculum policy in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is dynamic and not entirely predictable, as it is influenced by complex interactions between policy, educational actors, and the socio-cultural context of schools. Confirmatively, the findings of this study strengthen the framework *policy enactment* (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2015) *sense-making* policy by teachers (Spillane et al., 2002), which positions teachers as active actors in shaping the meaning of policy. Variations in Islamic Religious Education learning practices between schools confirm this argument *multi-level governance* that education policy does not operate in a linear fashion (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Honig, 2006). Confrontingly, these findings suggest that the assumption of autonomy as a driver of pedagogical innovation (OECD, 2018) does not fully apply in the context of religious education. This aspect has received relatively little attention in mainstream education policy literature, but has been addressed in studies of religious and moral education (Gearon, 2014; Jackson, 2019).

Variations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning practices between schools confirm the perspective *multi-level governance* (Hill & Hupe, 2021), view policy as a mediated process at multiple levels, from national policy to classroom practice. Findings indicate that the Independent Curriculum is not translated uniformly, but rather interpreted and negotiated according to school culture, teacher capacity, and diverse student characteristics. In this context, the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) pedagogical tradition serves as a*structuring context* This influences the direction of change while simultaneously limiting pedagogical transformation, so that curriculum autonomy does not automatically result in learning innovation. Teachers continue to adapt through hybrid pedagogical practices that integrate religious values with more inclusive, dialogical, and diversity-responsive learning. In line with the perspective *policy enactment* and *complexity*, this finding confirms that policy is an adaptive process that produces various forms *enactment* and *unintended consequences* This research expands the study of multicultural education, religious education in plural societies, and intercultural education by showing that diversity management, religious moderation, and intercultural dialogue are integral parts of *enactment* PAI policy in the Independent Curriculum.

Strengthening religious moderation and inclusive religious learning is the result of a complex negotiation process between the demands of the Independent Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education's pedagogical traditions, and teacher professionalism. From this perspective, *policy enactment* and *complexity theory*, teachers do not simply implement policies but adapt them to religious values, student characteristics, and the school context. Although curriculum flexibility opens up space for the development of tolerant, dialogical attitudes and respect for diversity, learning practices still face challenges in the form of strong normative learning traditions and the dominance of cognitive assessment. These findings confirm that inclusive religious learning is not

determined solely by policy design, but by teachers' ability to negotiate curriculum demands with values of religious moderation in diverse learning contexts. *Concept Map* The following map illustrates how policy complexity, Islamic Education pedagogical traditions, and teacher professional autonomy interact to shape hybrid learning practices. This map shows that *enactment* The Independent Curriculum is undergoing an adaptation process that has resulted in various efforts to strengthen religious moderation and inclusive learning, while also highlighting the challenges that arise in translating policies into everyday learning practices.

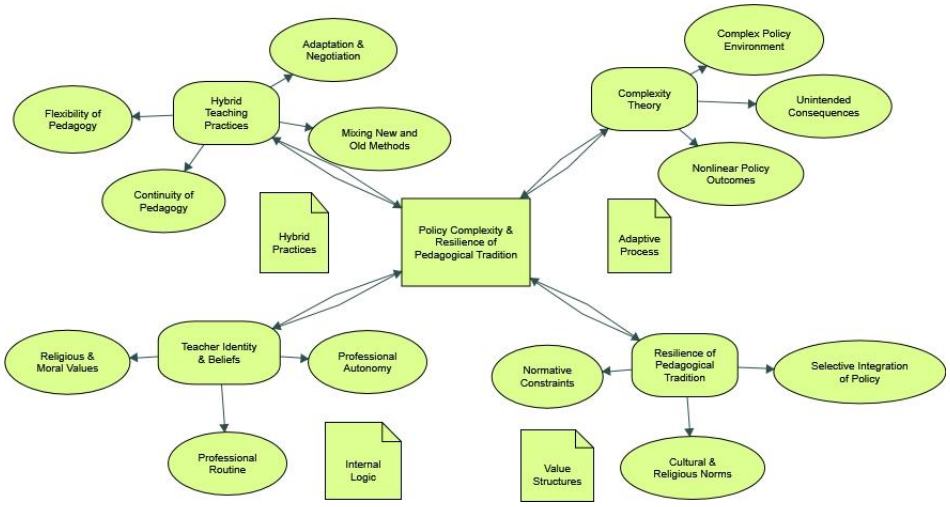


Figure 4: *Concept Map* Policy Complexity and the Resilience of Pedagogical Traditions

This *Concept Map* demonstrates that the enactment of the Independent Curriculum takes place within a complex and nonlinear policy environment. Hybrid learning practices emerge through a process of adaptation and negotiation between policy demands, Islamic Religious Education pedagogical traditions, and teacher professionalism. In this process, teachers strive to integrate the values of religious moderation, tolerance, and respect for diversity without neglecting the normative goals of religious learning. The variety of practices that emerge reflects the dynamics of policy enactment and serves as a form of pedagogical resilience in the face of curriculum change. These findings align with the perspective of complexity theory (Cairney, 2012; 2020), which views policy as a nonlinear process that produces diverse forms of adaptation and consequences that are not always planned. In the Islamic Religious Education context, the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum does not automatically result in uniform pedagogical transformation, but rather gives rise to ongoing negotiations between learning innovations, religious traditions, and the diverse needs of learners. This situation suggests that the primary challenge to inclusive religious learning lies not solely in policy design, but rather in teachers' ability to manage the tension between strengthening religious identity, religious moderation, and respect for diversity in everyday learning practices.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education policy in the Indonesian Independent Curriculum is a socially negotiated and context-dependent process, rather than a linear policy implementation. By integrating Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education, this study shows that

teachers continuously interpret, mediate, and reconstruct curriculum policy through the interaction between policy texts, institutional contexts, professional judgment, and the multicultural realities of classroom practice. This integrated perspective extends existing studies by illustrating that curriculum reform in religious education is shaped not only by policy design but also by subject-specific pedagogical traditions and the sociocultural diversity of learners.

5.1. *Enactment* Policy and Strengthening of Multicultural Values in Islamic Religious Education Learning

Teachers' interpretations of curriculum flexibility are not simply a response to administrative reforms but are deeply embedded in the epistemological and normative traditions of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Curriculum implementation becomes a process of professional interpretation rather than procedural compliance, where teachers continually negotiate curriculum expectations with the religious values, pedagogical beliefs, and diverse social and cultural backgrounds of learners. These findings support the central proposition of Policy Implementation Theory that policies do not have fixed meanings but are interpreted and socially reconstructed by educational actors according to professional knowledge and local contexts (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2012; 2015). Empirical evidence suggests that teachers do not simply implement the principles of flexibility, differentiated learning, or learner-centered pedagogy established by the Indonesian Independent Curriculum. Instead, they selectively reinterpret these principles through the normative objectives of PAI, integrating values such as tolerance, inclusivity, religious moderation, empathy, mutual respect, and intercultural dialogue into classroom learning. These findings suggest that curriculum policies function as flexible interpretative resources rather than prescriptive instructional manuals.

The current findings extend the Policy Implementation Theory in important ways, particularly Ball et al. (2012), emphasizing that policy implementation is shaped by contextual factors, professional identity, material conditions, and institutional culture. While these dimensions remain highly relevant, this research demonstrates that the epistemological and normative characteristics of a school subject constitute an additional interpretive layer that influences how teachers reconstruct policy. In Islamic Religious Education, policy interpretation is consistently mediated by religious values, ethical commitments, and character-building goals that shape teachers' pedagogical decisions. These subject-sensitive dimensions suggest that policy implementation cannot be fully understood solely through the institutional context and teacher role, but must consider the disciplinary and normative traditions embedded within a particular curriculum subject.

These findings align with the Multilevel Governance perspective (Hill & Hupe, 2014), which conceptualizes education policy as operating across multiple interconnected levels of governance, rather than through a simple top-down implementation process. Teacher interpretations are influenced not only by national curriculum documents but also by school leadership, curriculum coordinators, institutional culture, professional learning communities, and local community expectations. Multicultural values are realized through the ongoing interaction between national curriculum goals, school-level policy mediation, and classroom-level pedagogical decision-making. These findings suggest that curriculum implementation is a negotiated governance process in which the meaning of policy is progressively reshaped as it moves across institutional levels.

From a Complexity Theory perspective (Cairney, 2012, 2020), these findings further illustrate that curriculum implementation should be understood as an adaptive and nonlinear process, rather

than a predictable sequence of policy implementations. Teachers continually balance multiple, sometimes conflicting expectations, including curriculum standards, religious doctrine, students' cultural diversity, assessment requirements, parental expectations, and institutional priorities. Rather than producing standardized teaching practices, this complexity results in diverse forms of pedagogical adaptation across schools and classrooms. Therefore, such variation should not be interpreted as policy inconsistency, but as evidence of adaptive professional decision-making within a complex education system.

Overall, these findings suggest that the strengthening of multicultural values in Islamic Religious Education cannot be explained solely by curriculum design or established policies. Rather, it emerges from the ongoing interaction between policy texts, institutional governance, teacher roles, disciplinary traditions, and the sociocultural diversity of learners. This study extends Policy Implementation Theory by proposing that subject epistemology should be recognized as an additional analytical dimension shaping curriculum implementation, particularly in value-oriented subjects such as religious education. By integrating Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, and Complexity Theory, it will provide a more comprehensive explanation of how curriculum policies are interpreted, negotiated, and transformed into inclusive multicultural learning practices within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum.

5.2. Teacher Strategies in Managing Diversity and Building Intercultural Dialogue

Previous research consistently demonstrates that school leadership, organizational culture, and collaborative professional learning environments substantially influence curriculum implementation (Fullan, 2020; OECD, 2023). The current findings reinforce these observations and further reveal that curriculum coordinators, principals, the school's religious culture, and collegial interactions collectively shape how multicultural values are realized in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Rather than functioning as isolated instructional actors, teachers perform professional roles within an institutional environment that continuously mediates curriculum policies through formal regulations, organizational routines, professional collaboration, and shared educational values.

These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of Multilevel Governance Theory (Hill & Hupe, 2014). Although curriculum policies originate at the national level, their implementation is not transmitted directly to classroom practice through hierarchical administrative mechanisms. Instead, policies pass through multiple layers of institutional mediation, where principals, curriculum coordinators, subject teacher associations, school leadership teams, and local education authorities actively reinterpret policy objectives before they reach classroom instruction. Teachers' pedagogical decisions are influenced not only by national curriculum documents but also by institutional expectations, organizational culture, leadership practices, resource availability, and collective professional norms operating in each school.

Institutional mediation extends beyond administrative coordination to include the development of a shared educational vision regarding multicultural learning. In schools where leadership consistently promotes collaborative planning, professional dialogue, and reflective curriculum development, teachers demonstrate greater confidence in integrating religious moderation, intercultural dialogue, differentiated learning, and respect for diversity into classroom practices. Conversely, where institutional support is less systematic, teachers rely more on individual professional experience, resulting in greater variation in the implementation of multicultural learning. These findings suggest that differences in curriculum implementation are

not solely due to individual teacher competencies but arise from the interaction between teacher roles and institutional capacity.

This interpretation broadens the perspective of Multilevel Governance by showing that governance relationships are not simply vertical interactions between policy levels, but horizontal processes of professional collaboration that occur within schools. Curriculum coordinators, principals, teacher working groups, and professional learning communities serve as intermediary actors who translate national policies into locally meaningful pedagogical practices. Thus, curriculum implementation should be understood as a distributed governance process in which authority, responsibility, and professional interpretation are shared among various institutional actors, rather than concentrated within formal administrative structures.

From a Policy Implementation Theory perspective, these findings illustrate that teachers' strategies for managing diversity in the classroom emerge through ongoing negotiations between policy expectations and local realities (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Rather than implementing standardized teaching models, teachers tailor learning activities to students' cultural backgrounds, prior religious experiences, learning needs, and classroom interaction patterns. Collaborative discussions, contextual case analysis, dialogic learning, cooperative group work, and reflective classroom conversations are key pedagogical strategies through which multicultural values are embedded into everyday learning, rather than taught as isolated curricular content. These findings reinforce the argument that policy implementation is fundamentally interpretive, contextual, and relational.

These findings align with Complexity Theory (Cairney, 2012, 2020), which conceptualizes education policy as an adaptive system characterized by ongoing interactions among multiple actors operating within a dynamic institutional environment. Teacher strategies evolve through ongoing adjustments to changing classroom conditions, school priorities, curriculum expectations, parental aspirations, and the increasingly diverse social and religious identities of students. Variations in intercultural learning practices across schools should not be interpreted as inconsistent implementation, but rather as evidence of adaptive responses to complex educational environments. Complexity becomes a productive characteristic of curriculum implementation, rather than a barrier to policy implementation.

An important contribution of this study is the proposition that intercultural dialogue should be understood as an institutional achievement and not solely as an individual pedagogical competency. Teachers' capacity to promote inclusive religious learning depends on the coherence between national curriculum objectives, school leadership, organizational culture, professional collaboration, and classroom practices. These findings suggest that strengthening multicultural education requires policy support at multiple levels of government, rather than solely focusing on improving teachers' teaching competencies. Thus, the implementation of multicultural values in Islamic Religious Education is best conceptualized as a distributed institutional process emerging from the interaction of government structures, professional roles, and local educational contexts.

5.3. Religious Moderation and the Challenges of Inclusive Religious Learning in the Independent Curriculum

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policies within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum is characterized by ongoing negotiation rather than straightforward implementation. Teachers simultaneously respond to curriculum expectations, religious doctrine,

multicultural principles, institutional regulations, assessment requirements, and the increasingly diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of students. Strengthening religious moderation is not achieved through the direct implementation of curriculum provisions, but emerges through teachers' ongoing pedagogical adaptations within complex classroom environments. These findings strongly support Cairney's (2012, 2020) argument that policy outcomes emerge from adaptive interactions within complex systems, rather than from a linear implementation process. This research further demonstrates that curriculum complexity becomes even more pronounced in religious education because teachers must simultaneously juggle multiple normative and pedagogical responsibilities. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) requires teachers to balance religious authenticity, moral formation, multicultural citizenship, institutional expectations, and diverse student identities at every stage of teaching and learning. Complexity arises not only from organizational structures but from the coexistence of multiple educational goals that must be continuously balanced in classroom practice.

From the perspective of Policy Implementation Theory (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012), these findings suggest that curriculum flexibility does not diminish teachers' responsibilities; rather, it broadens the scope of professional judgment required for policy implementation. Teachers not only translate curriculum documents into classroom activities, but also continually interpret policies in relation to students lived experiences, local religious cultures, school expectations, and broader societal challenges. Religious moderation emerges as a pedagogical achievement resulting from teachers' interpretive work, not as an automatic consequence of curriculum reform. Viewed through the lens of Multilevel Governance (Hill & Hupe, 2014), the findings further reveal that inclusive religious learning relies on the interaction of governance processes operating simultaneously at the national, institutional, and classroom levels. National curriculum policies establish broad principles of flexibility, learner-centered learning, and the Pancasila Student Profile, while schools interpret these principles according to their organizational culture, leadership practices, and community context. Teachers then reconstruct these institutional interpretations in classroom practice, adapting teaching approaches to students' cultural diversity and local educational realities. Therefore, religious moderation emerges through a sequential process of policy mediation rather than through hierarchical policy transmission.

These findings challenge the implicit assumption in some curriculum implementation studies that increased policy flexibility naturally leads to greater pedagogical innovation. Although the Independent Curriculum provides substantial professional autonomy, teachers' capacity to develop inclusive and multicultural learning remains dependent on institutional support, a collaborative professional culture, leadership practices, assessment systems, and opportunities for continuous professional learning. Curriculum flexibility serves as a necessary but not sufficient condition for educational transformation. Sustainable policy implementation requires coherent governance arrangements that support teachers in negotiating the tensions between curriculum reform, religious traditions, and multicultural education goals.

This study extends Policy Implementation Theory by demonstrating that curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education is fundamentally subject-sensitive and mediated by the epistemological and normative traditions of religious education. It also advances curriculum policy research by integrating Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education into a unified analytical framework capable of explaining curriculum reform at multiple, interrelated institutional levels. It provides empirical evidence from

an educational context that remains underrepresented in international curriculum policy studies, thus broadening comparative understanding of multicultural policy implementation in religious education. It proposes that religious moderation should be understood as a dynamic outcome of policy implementation, emerging through the ongoing interaction between curriculum policy, institutional governance, teacher roles, and culturally diverse classroom practices, rather than as a predetermined outcome of curriculum reform.

6. Conclusion

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) policy within the Indonesian Independent Curriculum is a dynamic, contextual, and socially negotiated process, not simply a linear implementation of the policy. Drawing on an integrated perspective from Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, Complexity Theory, and Multicultural Education, findings indicate that curriculum policy is continuously interpreted, mediated, and reconstructed through interactions between teachers, school leaders, the institutional context, and the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of students. Teachers implement curriculum flexibility, pedagogical autonomy, and learner-centered learning by integrating multicultural values , including tolerance, inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, and religious moderation into daily classroom practices. These findings suggest that variations in curriculum implementation reflect adaptive responses to local contexts, rather than inconsistent implementation, and affirm that successful curriculum reform depends on the interaction between teacher roles, institutional governance, and contextual conditions.

This study makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it extends Policy Implementation Theory by demonstrating that curriculum implementation in Islamic Religious Education is fundamentally subject-sensitive**.** Teachers' interpretations are shaped not only by the institutional context but also by the epistemological and normative traditions of religious education. Second, this study advances curriculum policy research by integrating Policy Implementation Theory, Multilevel Governance, and Complexity Theory into a coherent analytical framework that explains how curriculum reform is implemented across interconnected levels of governance. Third, by providing empirical evidence from Indonesia, this study enriches international scholarship on curriculum policy, multicultural education, and religious education, highlighting that inclusive religious learning emerges through ongoing negotiations between curriculum policy, professional assessment, organizational culture, and diverse classroom realities, not simply through policy alone.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study was conducted in six high schools in a single province in Indonesia and primarily reflects the perspectives of teachers, principals, curriculum coordinators, supervisors, and policy stakeholders; therefore, the findings provide analytical rather than statistical generalizations. Future research should expand the analysis across educational levels, regions, and national contexts while incorporating learner perspectives and longitudinal evidence to better understand how curriculum implementation evolves over time. Overall, this study argues that the success of the Indonesian Independent Curriculum should be evaluated not solely on fidelity to the policy document, but on the capacity of schools and teachers to transform curriculum policy into inclusive, context-responsive, and multicultural educational practices.

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