

Moderate Islamic Character Education as a Preventive Strategy Against Religious Extremism: A Case Study

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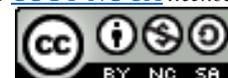
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ABSTRACT

Religious extremism poses a serious challenge to social stability and education in Indonesia, including in the Bangka Belitung region, which is characterized by cultural and religious diversity. This study aims to analyze the implementation of moderate Islamic character education at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang and its effectiveness as a strategy to prevent radicalization in vocational school environments. The study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the school principal, Islamic education teachers, guidance counselors, student council members, and students, supported by participatory observation and documentary studies. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions through triangulation of sources and techniques. The results of the study indicate that moderate Islamic character education is integrated into the PAI curriculum, extracurricular activities, and character-building programs based on the values of *tawasuth*, *tasamuh*, and *tawazun*. The internalization of these values is evident in students' attitudes of tolerance, social empathy, and rejection of radical content on social media. Additionally, collaboration between schools and the Ministry of Religion, police, and civil society organizations strengthens students' digital literacy and national awareness. These findings confirm that moderate Islamic education functions as a soft approach in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy, especially in vocational schools that are vulnerable to radical ideology infiltration. The implications of this study contribute theoretically to the development of a model of religious moderation education and practically to national education policies oriented toward strengthening the moderate character of the younger generation.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious extremism has become one of the most significant socio-political threats of the 21st century, threatening global peace, national stability, and inter-community trust (Benolli, Sbailò, & Rapticetta, 2021). The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, along with subsequent acts of terrorism in Europe, Asia, and Africa, highlighted the transnational nature of radicalization, facilitated by digital communications and global ideological networks. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia has faced repeated episodes of religiously motivated violence, ranging from bomb blasts to targeted sectarian attacks,

suggesting that the country's pluralist ethos is vulnerable to extremist propaganda. In this context, education is increasingly recognized as a sustainable and non-coercive means of countering radicalism, especially when promoting inclusive, critical, and tolerant interpretations of religion (Mujahid, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, moderate Islamic character education has been positioned as one of the strategic instruments in strengthening religious harmony and national unity, in line with the ideology of Pancasila (Bahri et al., 2022). Bangka Belitung Province, known for its ethnic and religious diversity, generally has harmonious inter-group relations but remains vulnerable to the influence of extremist narratives, especially through social media and informal networks (Zulfikar, Muhammad, Al-Fairusy, & Ikhwan, 2023). In this socio-cultural context, SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang functions as a miniature plural Indonesian society, accommodating students from various backgrounds. This makes the environment a strategic location to examine how educational interventions rooted in moderate Islamic values can function as a prevention mechanism against radicalization.

A number of previous studies have proven the role of Islamic education in building youth resilience to extremist ideologies. The integration of moderation values into the curriculum can strengthen students' critical thinking capacity, empathy, and tolerance (Munawir et al., 2023; Subakir, 2020). Research conducted by Subakir shows that values-based integrated Islamic education can strengthen students' moral frameworks and critical thinking skills, thereby reducing their vulnerability to extremist ideologies (Subakir, 2020). In the European context, Benolli et al. identified multisectoral cooperation between governments, civil society, and educational institutions as best practices in preventing radicalization (Benolli et al., 2021). However, most research in Indonesia has focused on pesantren and public secondary schools, with limited attention to the vocational education environment. This gap highlights the need for targeted research in vocational schools, where students may face unique socio-economic and ideological challenges.

This study specifically examines the implementation of moderate Islamic character education at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang, Bangka Belitung, as well as its effectiveness as a prevention strategy against religious extremism. This research is limited to the study: (1) pedagogical design and implementation of moderate Islamic character education; (2) perception and internalization of these values by students; and (3) school collaboration with community stakeholders in promoting religious moderation. By limiting coverage to a single vocational school in a culturally diverse region, the study provides a focused analysis without generalizing outside its immediate context.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze how moderate Islamic character education is implemented in SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang and evaluate its preventive function against religious extremism. The findings of this study are expected to benefit a range of stakeholders: policymakers can use this evidence to refine national education policies in countering extremism; educators can adjust pedagogical approaches to better integrate religious moderation; and local communities can strengthen youth involvement in fostering peaceful harmony (Bahri et al., 2022; Munawir et al., 2023). The research also provides an empirical basis for integrating moderate Islamic pedagogy into broader strategies in countering violent extremism (CVE).

The uniqueness of this study lies in its intersectional focus: linking moderate Islamic character education with the prevention of extremism in the context of vocational schools, a field that has not received much academic attention both in Indonesia and globally. Although previous studies have examined Islamic boarding schools and public high schools, this study highlights different educational ecosystems with unique cultural and socio-economic dynamics. These concerns arise due to growing evidence that adolescents in vocational settings are increasingly being targeted by extremist recruiters through online platforms, making timely educational interventions crucial to protect pluralism and social cohesion (Munawir et al., 2023)

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design (*Case Study*). The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this research is to understand in depth the process of cultivating moderate Islamic character as a preventive strategy against religious extremism at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang, Bangka Belitung. This approach is relevant because it allows researchers to

explore the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of informants in a natural context (Hasan, 2022). The case study design is used to reveal in detail the practice of moderate Islamic character education carried out in the school, so as to provide a comprehensive picture of the strategy for preventing religious extremism (Hasan, 2022).

The location of the research is SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang, Bangka Belitung, which was chosen purposively because this school has a character development program based on moderate Islamic values that is integrated in learning and extracurricular activities. Previous research has shown that schools based on fostering religious moderation values have significant potential in fortifying students from extremism (Munawir et al., 2023). The subjects of the study include school principals, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, counseling guidance teachers, student council administrators, and students who are active in religious activities. The selection of informants was carried out by purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) directly involved in the implementation of moderate Islamic character education, (2) having knowledge of the issue of radicalism in schools, and (3) being willing to provide information openly.

The data collection technique was carried out through three main techniques: in-depth interviews with school principals, PAI teachers, BK teachers, and students to obtain information about the concept, implementation, and strategies of moderate Islamic character education. Participatory observation of PAI learning, religious extracurricular activities, and character development programs to directly observe the process of internalizing the value of religious moderation. Documentation study of the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), student council work program, school discipline, and religious activity reports containing efforts to prevent religious extremism (Sofyan et al., 2023).

The data analysis technique uses the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana which includes: data reduction, namely the process of selection, focusing, and simplification of data from interviews, observations, and documents. Data presentation is compiling information in the form of narratives, tables, or charts to make it easier to understand. Drawing conclusions and verifying is to deduce the patterns, relationships, and meanings of the data and conduct member checks on informants to ensure accuracy (Munawir et al., 2023).

The validity test of the data is maintained through source triangulation (comparing data from various informants), technical triangulation (comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation), and member checks to informants to ensure the validity of the information. This approach is in line with previous research that emphasizes the importance of a combination of sources and techniques to obtain valid data in the study of character education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Design and Implementation of Moderate Islamic Character Education

The results of observations, interviews, and document analysis show that SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang has integrated moderate Islamic values in a structured manner in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum and extracurricular activities. This integration is not only formal in the classroom, but is also reinforced through a variety of school community-based activities that engage students across backgrounds. PAI teachers utilize critical discussion-based learning models, problem-based learning, and contextual approaches to encourage students' analytical thinking skills towards contemporary religious and social issues (Bahri et al., 2022; Munawir et al., 2023). Values such as *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance) are not only conveyed in the material of faith and morals, but are also integrated in the discussion of social issues through relevant actual case studies (Mujahid, 2021; Subakir, 2020).

This learning activity is in line with the concept of integrative Islamic education which emphasizes the combination of Islamic values with the ability to think critically and be responsive to global challenges (Subakir, 2020). This approach is also in line with Amin Abdullah's idea of scientific integration which emphasizes the importance of unifying religious and social sciences to form a moderate perspective in a pluralistic society (Benolli et al., 2021). Teachers at this school consistently provide space for students to explore differences of view, critique issues of radicalism, and find peaceful solutions based on religious values.

In addition to classroom learning, various co-curricular activities are important media for internalizing the value of religious moderation. Programs such as flash boarding schools, interfaith studies, student exchanges with other schools, and social service in a multicultural community have become the school's annual agenda (Habibah, Hanafi, Wahyuddin, & Suradji, 2025). This activity is designed to broaden students' horizons, strengthen social empathy, and foster awareness that diversity is *sunnatullah* that must be respected. Student Council program documentation shows that since the 2022/2023 school year, there has been an increase in student participation in cross-cultural activities by 35% compared to the previous year (Zulfikar et al., 2023). This increase shows a significant change in students' attitudes toward differences, which is also identified by (Das et al., 2022) as one of the indicators of the success of moderate Islamic character education.

In the context of preventing extremism, this school strategically adopts an Education-based Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) approach (Benolli et al., 2021). This strategy includes providing digital literacy materials to prevent the spread of radical content, fostering conflict mediation skills among students, and instilling critical attitudes towards violent ideologies. The emphasis on cross-group social interaction in the school environment is one of the main pillars of the program, given that research in Europe and Asia shows that social isolation and lack of intercultural interaction can increase vulnerability to radicalization (Benolli et al., 2021; Das et al., 2022).

Field findings also revealed that the main success factor for the implementation of moderate Islamic education at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang is the commitment of school management and teachers to adapt learning according to the local social context. For example, case studies used in the classroom are often drawn from actual events in local communities, such as social conflicts or differences of opinion between citizens that are resolved peacefully. Thus, students not only understand the values of moderation theoretically, but can also see their relevance in real life (Mujahid, 2021).

Overall, the design and implementation of moderate Islamic character education in this school shows success in combining value-based learning strategies, participatory approaches, and cross-cultural activities. This success is supported by international theories and practices on education-based extremism prevention that emphasize the importance of building positive social networks, strengthening inclusive identities, and increasing students' critical literacy capacity on global issues (Benolli et al., 2021; Subakir, 2020). This model has the potential to be replicated in other schools as a strategic effort to prevent radicalism and strengthen religious moderation in Indonesia.

2. Perception and Internalization of Moderation Values by Students

In-depth interviews with 12 students who are active in the Intra-School Student Organization (OSIS) and involved in various religious activities in schools show that the majority of them understand religious moderation as an attitude that includes respect for differences of belief, rejection of all forms of violence, and the prioritization of dialogue and deliberation in resolving differences (Musadad, Nahidloh, Nasik, & Pujiati, 2024). This understanding is in line with the concept of religious moderation launched by the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, which emphasizes a balance between commitment to religious teachings and openness to socio-cultural diversity (Ma'arif et al., 2024).

However, the results of the analysis show that there is a variation in the level of understanding among students. Students who are consistently involved in religious extracurricular activities such as recitation, interfaith discussions, and moderate leadership training have a more comprehensive insight into the values of moderation than students who rely solely on formal classroom learning (Munawir et al., 2023; Sofyan et al., 2023). This difference indicates that learning the value of religious moderation is more effective when integrated into participatory and contextual learning experiences (Das et al., 2022).

The real indicator of the internalization of the value of religious moderation is reflected in the social behavior of students in the school environment and the digital world. Some students admitted to actively rejecting invitations to join online forums that contain hate speech or provocative content that has the potential to divide harmony (Lestawi & Kusuma, 2023). In addition, a number of

students reported that they were used to reporting radically charged content to the Counseling Guidance teacher or student council supervisor for follow-up (Limbong, Firmansyah, & Fahmi, 2022; Salim, Zaini, Wahib, & Fauzi, 2024). This behavior corroborates the findings of Zulfikar et al. that critical awareness of digital information is an integral part of character education in the social media era, especially in shaping students' ideological resilience (Zulfikar et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the interview also revealed that the internalization of the value of moderation often starts from habituation in daily interactions. Students who are used to discussing with friends of different religions or social backgrounds report increased empathy and open-mindedness (Nur Afifah, 2024). This habituation is in line with the research of Setiowati et al. which stated that cross-cultural interaction in the school environment plays an important role in reducing prejudice and building mutual trust (Setiowati, Utomo, & Agustina, 2023). In this context, the role of teachers as role models is a crucial factor, where teachers who display tolerant and fair behavior are able to strengthen the internalization of the value of moderation in students (Hastasari, Setiawan, & Aw, 2022).

However, this internalization process does not always go smoothly. Some students admitted that they still face pressure from the environment outside the school, especially from social media which is often a means of spreading exclusive or intolerant ideologies (Juwaini, 2022). This challenge requires a strategy to strengthen digital literacy based on moderate Islamic values, so that students are not only able to filter information, but also have the skills to respond argumentatively and politely (Asari et al., 2024).

The results of these findings also show a close relationship between the perception and internalization of moderation values. Students who have a positive perception of the concept of moderation tend to be more consistent in displaying moderate behavior, both in face-to-face communication and in the digital space. In contrast, students with narrow or biased perceptions of religious moderation show vulnerability to intolerant narratives (Paksi et al., 2025). This emphasizes the importance of educational interventions that are able to form positive perceptions while strengthening moderation practices in real life (Sapphire et al., 2023).

Thus, internalizing the value of moderation among students is not an instant process, but rather the result of continuous learning, the influence of the social environment, and active involvement in positive activities. This study emphasizes that schools play a strategic arena in developing the perception and internalization of religious moderation through curriculum integration, teacher examples, and strengthening inclusive extracurricular activities (Asari, Junaidin, Hilir, & Saputra, 2023). In addition, collaboration between schools, families, and local communities is needed to ensure that the value of moderation is not only a discourse, but also embedded as part of the character of students who are ready to face the challenges of a pluralistic global era.

3. School Collaboration with Stakeholders

Collaboration between schools and stakeholders is a key strategy in strengthening the implementation of religious moderation in the vocational education environment. At SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang, this partnership is strategically built with various parties, including the Office of the Ministry of Religion of Pangkalpinang City, the local Resort Police (Polres), as well as civil society organizations that have a focus on digital literacy, multicultural education, and extremism prevention. The forms of cooperation carried out include the implementation of thematic seminars, digital literacy training, interfaith discussion forums, and teacher assistance in strengthening national insight (Ma'arif et al., 2024; Suhra, 2023).

Based on cooperation documents archived at the school, the Religious Moderation for Vocational Students program has reached 420 students in the past year (Munawir et al., 2023). This activity is designed to not only provide knowledge, but also shape students' critical thinking skills in filtering information, especially in the era of social media that is vulnerable to the infiltration of radical ideologies. The Ministry of Religious Affairs acts as a facilitator of religious moderation policy materials, the Police provide education related to digital security and the prevention of online radicalization, while civil society organizations contribute community-based approaches and field experiences in fostering tolerance (Avdukic, Khaleel, Abdullah, & Brawe, 2023; Juwaini, 2022).

This collaboration is in line with the findings of Benolli et al., which affirm that a multisectoral approach is one of the determining factors for the success of violent extremism prevention programs in schools (Benolli et al., 2021). Such an approach allows schools to access a wider range of resources, expertise, and networks, so that interventions are not partial, but comprehensive. This is also in line with Asari et al., who underlined the importance of synergy between educational institutions, law enforcement officials, and civil society in building students' ideological resilience (Asari et al., 2024).

In addition, the collaboration carried out at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang also has a sustainability dimension. The program does not stop at a one-time activity, but is designed as an interconnected continuous series. For example, seminars on strengthening religious moderation were followed by mentoring sessions and project-based evaluations, where students were asked to produce positive digital content such as tolerance education videos and reflective articles (Guci, Nurdin, & Ajizah, 2024). This approach is in line with the idea of multilayer engagement put forward by Ridha et al., where educational interventions run in layers from the cognitive to affective levels (Ridha, Buska, & Prihartini, 2020).

From the perspective of strengthening the hidden curriculum, the involvement of external stakeholders also helps schools create a conducive social climate. The presence of security forces and religious leaders in school activities provides a symbolic message that religious moderation is not just a subject matter, but a social value that is maintained together by all elements of society (Missouri, 2023). This symbolization is important because it shapes students' positive perceptions of diversity and encourages them to become agents of peace in their environment.

Furthermore, this collaboration model also strengthens teachers' capacity to integrate moderation values into daily learning. Training held with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, for example, helps teachers develop pedagogical strategies to address intolerant narratives in the classroom, while digital literacy training with the support of civil society organizations equips teachers with the skills to identify radically charged content on the internet (Faozan, 2020). The long-term impact of this strategy is the formation of a learning ecosystem that is safe, inclusive, and adaptive to ideological challenges in the digital age.

In terms of evaluation, this collaboration has shown positive results. Based on an internal survey by the school, 87% of students stated that they understood the concept of religious moderation better after participating in this collaborative program, and 78% admitted that they were better able to identify hoax information related to religious issues on social media. These findings are consistent with the research of Umar et al., which shows that cross-sectoral collaboration-based education programs have a high level of effectiveness in improving students' critical literacy on the issue of radicalism (Abu Nawas, Masri, & Shariati, 2022; Ourmi, 2025; Umar, Ismail, Rahmi, & Arifin, 2024).

Thus, the experience of SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang shows that school collaboration with stakeholders is not just complementary, but is a strategic element that is able to strengthen the school's preventive function against potential radicalization. This model can be replicated in other vocational schools with local context adjustments, thus encouraging the formation of resilient, adaptive and social-peace-oriented educational networks.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that moderate Islamic character education at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang has a strategic role as a soft approach in preventing radicalization among the younger generation. The integration of *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance) values in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, extracurricular activities, and character development programs has proven effective in forming inclusive attitudes, social empathy, and critical awareness of students towards religious issues and radically charged digital content. The internalization of these values not only strengthens the identity of moderate Islam, but also fosters the ideological resilience of students in the face of extremist propaganda. In addition, the school's collaboration with external stakeholders such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the police, and civil society organizations contributes significantly to strengthening students' digital literacy,

national insights, and positive social networks. This multisectoral partnership model shows that education-based extremism prevention requires cross-sectoral synergy to be more comprehensive and sustainable.

The implications of this study emphasize the importance of making moderate Islamic character education an integral part of the national strategy of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), especially in vocational schools that are vulnerable to being targeted by radical ideology infiltration. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on religious moderation education in the context of vocational education; Meanwhile, practically, it provides recommendations for policymakers, educators, and the community in strengthening preventive efforts against violent extremism through strengthening the moderate character of the younger generation.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its focus on a single case study at SMK Negeri 2 Pangkalpinang, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings with different socio-cultural contexts. The use of a qualitative approach with a relatively small, purposively selected sample may not fully represent broader student and teacher perspectives, while reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, particularly on sensitive issues such as religious extremism and tolerance. Additionally, the study captures data within a specific time frame, whereas the dynamics of radicalization—especially through social media and evolving digital technologies—are continuously changing. The absence of quantitative measures and comparative analysis with other institutions further limits the ability to assess the broader effectiveness of the model. Future research is therefore recommended to employ mixed-methods, larger samples, longitudinal designs, and cross-institutional comparisons to strengthen the validity and applicability of findings..

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

M conceived the study, conducted the field research, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. MWA contributed to the research design, supervised the study, and critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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