

Religious Pluralism in Indonesia's National Curriculum: A Critical Review of Interfaith Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines how interfaith themes and religious pluralism are represented in Indonesia's national religious education curricula by comparing two of Indonesia's latest curricula: Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and Kurikulum Merdeka (KM). Although Indonesia is characterized by profound religious diversity and an official commitment to *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation), religious instruction remains confessional and segregated by student affiliation. Using a qualitative document-based approach, this research analyzes curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and secondary-level textbooks through curriculum content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal that K13 primarily emphasizes doctrinal consolidation and moralistic tolerance, offering limited substantive engagement with religious others. Interfaith relations are framed largely in abstract or cautionary terms, reinforcing a mono-religious learning model. In contrast, Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) introduces a discursive shift toward pluralism, particularly through the Profil Pelajar Pancasila and project-based P5 modules, which create opportunities for dialogical and experiential engagement with diversity. However, the confessional structure of religious education persists, and implementation varies across contexts. The study concludes that while Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) signals important ideological and pedagogical progress, structural constraints and uneven teacher preparedness continue to limit the development of meaningful interfaith religious literacy in Indonesia's plural society.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is home to one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world. With six officially recognized religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism and more than 1,300 ethnic groups, the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity") functions as a foundational principle for managing pluralism within the nation-state (Ananta et al., 2015; BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023; Government of Indonesia, 2023). In such a context, religious education occupies a uniquely strategic position (Amalia, 2025). Beyond transmitting doctrinal knowledge, it shapes how young citizens understand religious difference, negotiate identity, and engage with others in a multireligious society (Hefner, 2019; Jackson, 2014). Yet in the post-reformasi era which is marked by democratization, digital media expansion, and episodes of sectarian mobilization, Indonesia has experienced renewed interreligious tensions and polarization, raising urgent questions about whether its education system adequately prepares students for plural democratic life (Hadiz, 2016; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018).

Religious education in Indonesia is institutionally structured as a confessional subject delivered according to students' declared religious affiliation, as mandated by national education law (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). While this arrangement safeguards the constitutional right of students to receive instruction within their own tradition, it simultaneously institutionalizes faith-based separation within classrooms (Amalia et al., 2024; Raihani, 2012). This model reflects what scholars describe as a strategy of pluralism through regulated recognition rather than integrative dialogue, where religious diversity is acknowledged but epistemic boundaries remain intact (Menchik, 2016; Yusuf & Sterkens, 2015). Critics have questioned whether such a segregated structure sufficiently cultivates the competencies necessary for democratic citizenship in a multireligious society (Jeff, 2015; Meer & Modood, 2012; Raihani, 2014). Although policy discourse increasingly emphasizes *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) and interfaith harmony, the structural organization of religious instruction has remained largely unchanged.

Over the past decade, Indonesia has undertaken major educational reforms through the implementation of Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and, more recently, Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) introduced in 2021. These reforms aim to modernize the education system by shifting from content-heavy memorization toward competency-based and student-centered learning (Kemdikbud, 2022; OECD/ADB, 2015). Official frameworks highlight the importance of character formation, ethical citizenship, and global awareness, which frequently invoke Pancasila and religious moderation as guiding principles (Raihani, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). In KM, this orientation is institutionalized through the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* and project-based learning modules (P5), which explicitly promote values of diversity and intercultural engagement (Kemdikbudristek, 2022).

However, scholarship on religious education reform in Indonesia points to a persistent tension between pluralist rhetoric and structural continuity. Studies of state-religion relations demonstrate that Indonesia's model of pluralism operates through institutional containment of religious difference rather than sustained dialogical engagement (Menchik, 2016; van Bruinessen, 2012). Within education, this has translated into a curriculum architecture that consolidates religious identity within separate instructional streams (Raihani, 2012; Yusuf & Sterkens, 2015). While inclusivity and moderation are increasingly articulated in official discourse (Hilmy, 2013; Künkler & Stepan, 2013), classroom practice often remains normatively bounded, which emphasize moral coexistence rather than comparative or dialogical exploration of religious traditions (Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018). Moreover, reform

implementation is uneven across regions, shaped by teacher preparedness, institutional capacity, and local religious dynamics (Bjork, 2003; OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

As a result, Indonesia's religious education reform is characterized by a paradox: while discursive pluralism is brought to the forefront, structural pluralism remains limited. However, while existing scholarship has produced important insights on Islamic education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) and more broadly religious politics, there are relatively few studies that have systematically examined curriculum documents themselves as ideological texts. Little comparative analysis exists regarding how interfaith themes are embedded or marginalized within Indonesia's two main curriculum frameworks. In particular, few studies interrogate whether Kurikulum Merdeka represents a substantive structural shift away from K13 or merely a discursive reframing of existing confessional arrangements.

This paper fills that gap by critically exploring the space for interfaith religious education in Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka. By analyzing official curriculum documents, policy statements, and religious education textbooks for a set of major religions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism), the study explores both overt references to religious pluralism, as well as implicit pedagogical assumptions that underlie these references. It assesses whether they promote meaningful engagement with religious diversity, or reinforce a disconnected and mono-religious approach to learning.

Adopting a qualitative, document-based research design, the study applies curriculum content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how religious difference is structured, represented, and ideologically framed within the two curricula. It is guided by the following research questions: (1) How are interfaith themes and religious diversity structured and represented within Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly in its policy framework and religious subject content? (2) In what ways do Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Merdeka introduce discursive and pedagogical shifts in the framing of religious moderation and interfaith engagement?

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, non-empirical research design, relying on document-based analysis to investigate the treatment of interfaith religious education in two major curriculum frameworks implemented in Indonesia: the Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM). Due to practical limitations, namely time constraints and the unavailability of field access, the study does not employ empirical methods such as interviews, surveys, or classroom observations. Instead, it focuses on the critical examination of textual materials, including curriculum frameworks, policy guidelines, and official religious education textbooks across four recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This approach is grounded in interpretivist educational research, which emphasizes the contextual interpretation of meaning, values, and sociocultural constructs within documents (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The primary objective of the study is to evaluate how the concepts of religious pluralism, interfaith tolerance, and inclusive pedagogy are articulated within the official religious education curriculum documents. To achieve this, two methodological lenses are applied: curriculum content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). These are complementary approaches frequently used in education research to interpret both structural and ideological patterns in educational texts (Apple, 2004; Fairclough, 2003; Krippendorff, 2018). Curriculum content analysis enables the researcher to systematically examine instructional elements such as core competencies, learning outcomes, and

value-based themes. Meanwhile, CDA is applied to interrogate how language, representation, and ideology shape the construction of religious others, national identity, and interfaith relations within educational materials (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). See Figure 1 below for the research design and analytical procedure of the study.

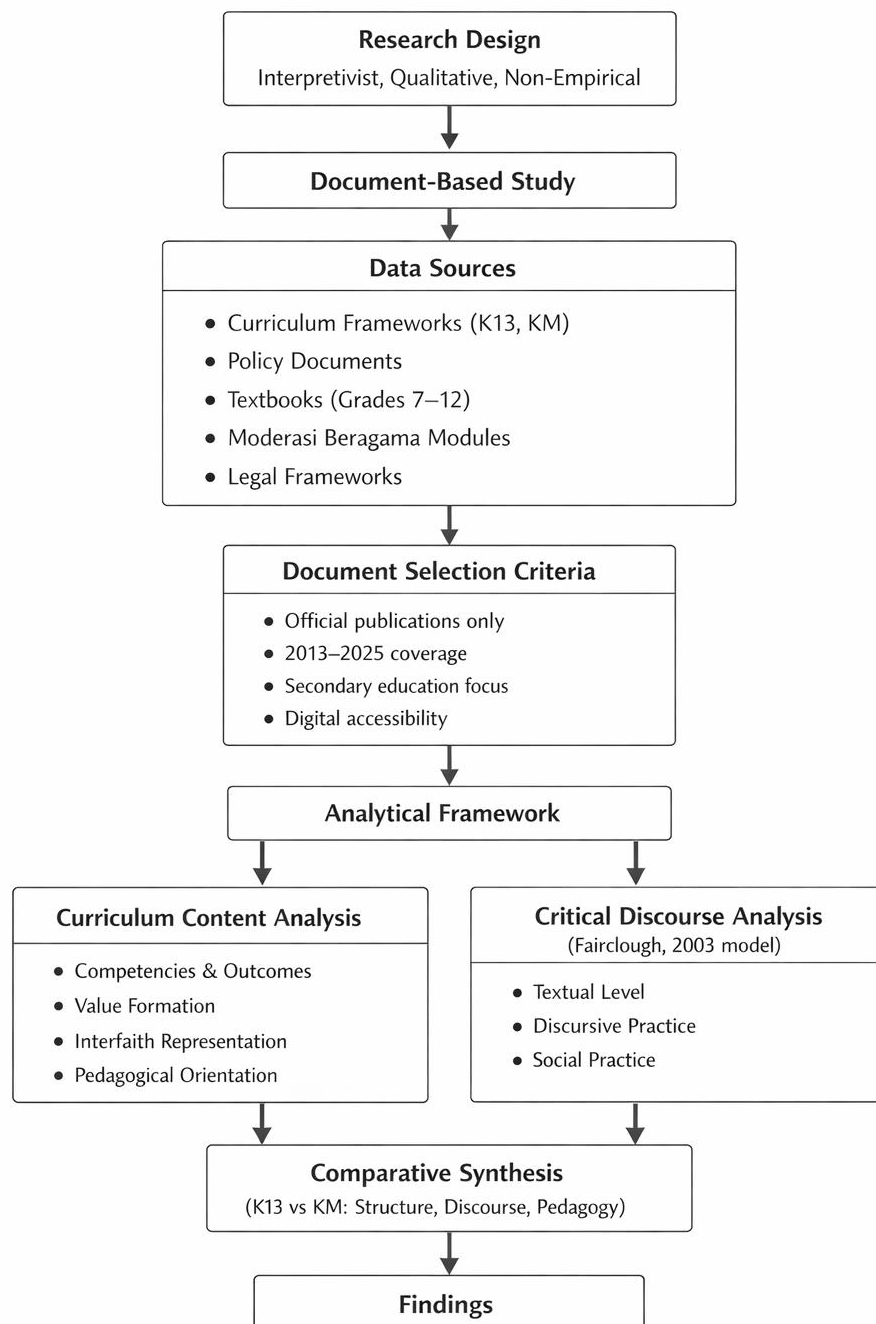


Figure 1. Research design and analytical procedure of the study

Figure 1 illustrates the research design and analytical procedure of the study. The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative document-based approach, drawing on official curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and textbooks related to Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and Kurikulum Merdeka (KM). These materials were analyzed using curriculum content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Findings were generated through a comparative synthesis of structural, discursive, and pedagogical dimensions across both curricula.

Data for this study are drawn from official government publications and institutional repositories. For Kurikulum 2013, the analysis includes the *Kompetensi Inti dan Kompetensi Dasar* (Core and Basic Competencies) for religious education subjects, as well as corresponding *Buku Guru* (Teacher's Book) and *Buku Siswa* (Student's Book) from Grades 7 to 12. For the Kurikulum Merdeka, primary sources include the *Capaian Pembelajaran* (Learning Outcomes) documents for Pendidikan Agama and Pendidikan Pancasila, the *Panduan Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka*, and thematic project materials from the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), particularly the modules on *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *Berkebinekaan Global* (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Supplementary policy texts such as the *Moderasi Beragama* modules published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Government of Indonesia, 2023), and the National Education Law (UU No. 20 Tahun 2003), are also included for ideological framing and legal context (Republic of Indonesia, 2003).

Curriculum content analysis was first conducted to identify the presence, depth, and structure of interfaith themes in both curricula. The analysis focused on several dimensions: (1) the framing of religious diversity in core competencies and learning objectives; (2) value formation related to tolerance, empathy, and unity; (3) direct references to other religions or worldviews within lesson narratives; and (4) the presence or absence of dialogical pedagogies or comparative approaches. These elements were assessed comparatively across K13 and Kurikulum Merdeka to identify thematic shifts and content evolution. Comparative matrices were used to visually organize similarities and differences across subjects and grade levels (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2018). See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Curriculum Content Analysis

Analytical Dimension	Coding Focus	Indicators Examined	Example from K13	Example from KM	Interpretation
1. Framing of Religious Diversity	How diversity is positioned conceptually	Civic description, theological framing, moral obligation, national asset	"Kita hidup di negara yang memiliki banyak agama."	"Menunjukkakan sikap terbuka terhadap keberagaman keyakinan."	Shift from descriptive acknowledgment (K13) to normative openness (KM)
2. Representation of Other Religions	Depth and quality of representation	Named traditions, explanation of beliefs, comparative discussion	"Menjaga akidah agar tidak terpengaruh ajaran lain."	P5: Students explore values in different traditions	K13 frames others cautiously; KM allows inquiry but indirectly
3. Depth of Interfaith Engagement	Level of engagement (0–4 scale)	0 = none; 1 = mention; 2 = tolerance; 3 = inquiry; 4 =	Mostly Level 1–2 (moral tolerance)	Level 3 in P5 modules (interviews, reflection)	KM introduces dialogical potential, though optional

Analytical Dimension	Coding Focus	Indicators Examined	Example from K13	Example from KM	Interpretation
		comparative theology			
4. Pedagogical Orientation	Teaching approach encouraged	Memorization, moral instruction, reflection, dialogue, experiential learning	Multiple-choice on tolerance verses	Interview projects, collaborative portfolios	Shift from doctrinal recall (K13) to project-based exploration (KM)
5. Religious Identity Positioning	How faith identity is constructed	Protective, exclusive, civic, dialogical	“Berinteraksi ... namun tetap berhati-hati menjaga akidah.”	“Sikap terbuka sebagai bagian dari iman yang dewasa.”	From defensive framing to maturity-based openness
6. Structural Integration of Interfaith Learning	Institutional placement	Integrated in subject vs peripheral project	No integrated interfaith module	Interfaith elements in P5 (not core subject)	Structural segregation persists in both curricula

To complement structural analysis, the study applied critical discourse analysis following Fairclough’s (2003) three-dimensional model of textual, discursive, and social practices. Textual analysis focused on how interfaith themes, pluralism, and national unity were constructed linguistically through word choice, thematic framing, and metaphors. For example, how the term “agama lain” (other religions) was referenced, whether differences were framed as problematic or complementary, and how religious others were represented in moral narratives. Discursive practices were examined through the production and institutional endorsement of the texts, particularly how policy terms such as *moderasi beragama* were introduced, defined, and operationalized by state institutions. The final level of analysis, the social practice, explored how these discourses intersect with broader ideological projects in Indonesia, such as Pancasila pluralism, religious nationalism, and post-reformasi decentralization (Fairclough, 2003; Hadiz, 2016; Menchik, 2016; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). See Table 2 below.

Table 2. Application of Fairclough’s (2003) Three-Dimensional CDA Model in the Study

CDA Dimensi	Analytical Focus	Guiding Questions	Data Examined	Example from K13	Example from KM	Analytical Implication
1. Textual Analysis (Micro-Level)	Language, vocabulary, framing of actors	How are “other religions” described? Are they framed as threat,	Textbook passages, competency statement, student exercises	“Berinteraksi i... namun tetap berhati-hati menjaga akidah.”	“Menunjukkan sikap terbuka terhadap keberagaman sebagai bagian dari	K13 uses cautious/defensive modality; KM shifts toward openness and

CDA Dimension	Analytical Focus	Guiding Questions	Data Examined	Example from K13	Example from KM	Analytical Implication
		neutral presence, or dialogical partners? What verbs and adjectives are used?			iman yang dewasa.”	maturity framing
2. Discursive Practice (Meso-Level)	Production and institutional circulation of discourse	How do state institutions define “moderasi beragama”? How are curriculum texts authorized and standardized? What intertextual references appear?	Policy documents, CP/KI/KD frameworks, Moderasi Beragama modules	Moderation implied but not explicitly named in KI/KD	“Moderasi beragama” explicitly embedded in CP and P5 guidance	KM institutionalizes moderation as policy discourse rather than implicit value
3. Social Practice (Macro-Level)	Broader ideological and sociopolitical context	How does curriculum discourse reflect Indonesia’s model of pluralism? How does it reproduce confessional segregation?	Legal frameworks (UU No. 20/2003), curriculum architecture, structural organization of subjects	Religious instruction segregated by faith affiliation	Structure unchanged, but pluralist rhetoric expanded	Structural confessionalism persists despite discursive pluralization

The unit of analysis consists of curriculum and textbook materials at the secondary education level (Grades 7–12), focused on four officially recognized religious education subjects: Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI), Pendidikan Agama Kristen, Pendidikan Agama Hindu, and Pendidikan Agama Buddha. Wherever available, chapters, teaching guides, and student exercises were analyzed to extract representations of interfaith themes. In addition to explicit content (e.g., chapter titles, learning outcomes), attention was paid to implicit ideological cues embedded in textual structure, sequencing, and the selection of moral exemplars. This aligns with earlier scholarship showing how ideology in curriculum is often transmitted through what is emphasized and what is omitted (Apple, 2004; Luke, 1995).

Selection of documents was guided by specific inclusion criteria. Only materials officially published or endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Culture (*Kemdikbud*), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (*Kemendikbudristek*), or the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kemenag*) between 2013 and 2025 were included. Textbooks and guides had to be available through official or institutional repositories in digital format. Scholarly literature was selected based on relevance to curriculum reform, religious education, and pluralism in Indonesia. Peer-reviewed articles from indexed journals were prioritized, particularly those published after 2015 to ensure recency and alignment with policy transitions. This includes studies such as Raihani (2018), who analyzes multicultural citizenship within Indonesian education policy; Arifianto (2019), who examines tensions between moderation and conservatism in religious education contexts; and Yusuf and Sterkens (2015), who critically assess state regulation of religious education in post–New Order Indonesia. These works help triangulate and contextualize primary document analysis with field-based and policy-oriented insights.

While this document-based approach offers a structured and focused method for assessing curriculum design and policy discourse, it is not without limitations. As a non-empirical study, it does not capture how teachers interpret or implement the curriculum in real-world classroom settings. This is especially important given that studies have shown wide variation in how religious values are applied in different provinces, schools, and communities (Azra & Thaha, 2020). Moreover, due to access limitations, the study's coverage of non-Islamic religious education materials is less comprehensive than for Islamic PAI textbooks. Nonetheless, this approach provides a critical foundation for understanding how curriculum documents officially frame and communicate religious pluralism in Indonesia's national education system. Finally, this research involves no direct engagement with human subjects and is therefore exempt from ethical review. All materials analyzed are publicly accessible and cited in accordance with academic standards and fair use policies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Curriculum Structure and Policy Intent (RQ-1)

The structure of religious education under both the Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) reflects Indonesia's long-standing policy of segregating instruction based on the learner's religion, as mandated by national education law (Raihani, 2012; Republic of Indonesia, 2003). While K13 emphasized standardization and central control through *Kompetensi Inti* (KI) and *Kompetensi Dasar* (KD) (Kemdikbud, 2014), KM marked a pedagogical shift by introducing *Capaian Pembelajaran* (CP) and project-based learning (*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila*, or P5) (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Both systems are rooted in Pancasila values and aim to foster character formation, nationalism,

and religious identity (Hefner & Hefner, 2011; Raihani, 2018). Despite these shared foundations, KM introduces broader philosophical goals through its emphasis on learner agency, contextual learning, and the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). The profile includes six competencies: faith and piety, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity. Interfaith education is most directly addressed in the “Berkebinekaan Global” (Global Diversity) dimension, where students are expected to understand and respect cultural and religious differences (Kemdikbudristek, 2022).

At the structural level, both curricula institutionalize religious education as a confessional subject positioned alongside other core disciplines, rather than as a shared civic learning space (Raihani, 2012; Yusuf & Sterkens, 2015). Under K13, the KI/KD framework tightly organizes competencies around spiritual attitudes (*sikap spiritual*) and social attitudes (*sikap sosial*), reinforcing religion as a domain of personal piety and moral conduct within one’s own tradition (Kemdikbud, 2014). Although KM introduces greater flexibility through CP and interdisciplinary projects, it does not fundamentally alter the confessional delivery model. Religious subjects remain separated by faith affiliation, and no formal mechanism exists for comparative or co-instructional engagement across traditions (Menchik, 2016; Raihani, 2018). Thus, while KM broadens philosophical aims through the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*, the institutional architecture of religious education continues to prioritize identity consolidation over structured interreligious dialogue. This structural continuity suggests that policy reform has focused more on pedagogical method and competency framing than on reconfiguring the foundational organization of religious learning itself.

Interfaith Content in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Other Religious Subjects under K13 (RQ-1)

In the Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) curriculum under K13, the theme of interfaith tolerance appears sporadically but lacks depth. In the PAI Grade 8 Buku Siswa (K13), a chapter titled “*Akhlak Terhadap Sesama Umat Beragama*” introduces the idea of religious harmony, citing Quranic verses such as Surah Al-Kafirun (109:6): “*Lakum diinukum waliya diin*” (“To you your religion, and to me mine”). While this establishes a basic theological justification for tolerance, the lesson quickly shifts toward caution: “*Kita harus menjaga akidah kita agar tidak terpengaruh oleh ajaran lain.*” (We must protect our faith so as not to be influenced by other teachings) (Kemdikbud, 2018).

The presentation of other religions is generally confined to abstract mentions. In Grade 10 PAI, students are told: “*Kita hidup di negara yang memiliki banyak agama. Tugas kita adalah menghormati agama lain sesuai ajaran Islam.*” Yet no attempt is made to introduce even basic facts about Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist practices. The concept of religious difference is framed passively, acknowledged but not engaged. This trend is consistent across other religions’ textbooks. For instance, in the Kristen Grade 9 Buku Siswa, other religions are mentioned only in civic contexts (e.g., religious holidays, tolerance laws), but never in theological or ethical comparison. This mono-religious model promotes what scholars call “segregated pluralism” (Apple, 2004), where learners coexist without meaningful understanding. The hidden curriculum (Eisner, 1979; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Margolis, 2001) reinforces a view of one’s own religion as the moral center, with others acknowledged only at the periphery. This framing is especially problematic in multicultural regions like Central Java, Maluku, or North Sulawesi, where daily interfaith interaction is common.

Kurikulum Merdeka and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila Framework (RQ-2)

Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) offers a more integrated framework for character and civic education through the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (PPP). The key element related to interfaith education is the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika P5* module, which encourages exploration of local and national diversity. In this project, students from different religious backgrounds are invited to co-create portfolios or posters showcasing shared values like honesty, compassion, and community spirit. For example, in the P5 module “Merayakan Keberagaman” (Celebrating Diversity), one activity asks students to interview someone from a different religion and present what they learned in a creative form. A suggested prompt reads: “*Temukan satu nilai kebaikan dalam tradisi keagamaan yang berbeda dari agamamu.*” (Find one good value in a religious tradition different from your own) (BSKAP, 2022). These activities create pedagogical entry points for interfaith learning, though they are optional and dependent on school initiative.

In terms of religious subjects, the PAI CP (Capaian Pembelajaran) for Grade 10 includes a competency titled: “*Menunjukkan sikap moderasi beragama dalam kehidupan sosial.*” (Demonstrate religious moderation in social life). This is a notable shift from K13, where religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) was not named explicitly. Teachers are encouraged to connect this theme with real-world issues like religious conflict, social media misinformation, and sectarian bias (Kemdikbud, 2018). However, Merdeka still maintains the segregation of instruction by religion. A Muslim student will study Islamic moderation; a Christian student will study Christian ethics, but no formal space exists for comparative or dialogical interfaith education. The curriculum remains confessional in its structure, though it invites non-confessional values through P5.

Textbook Language and Framing: A Discourse Analysis (RQ-2)

A comparative discourse analysis of K13 and Merdeka textbooks reveals significant differences in how religious diversity is framed. In K13’s Grade 11 PAI textbook, students are taught: “*Berinteraksi dengan pemeluk agama lain adalah bagian dari dakwah bil hal, namun harus tetap berhati-hati dalam menjaga akidah.*” (Interacting with followers of other religions is part of good behavior, but caution must be taken to protect our faith). The implication here is that interfaith relations are conditional: positive, but potentially dangerous. The “other” remains a doctrinal risk. By contrast, in the PAI Merdeka CP document, students are asked to: “*Menunjukkan sikap terbuka terhadap keberagaman keyakinan di masyarakat sebagai bagian dari iman yang dewasa.*” (Show openness to diverse beliefs in society as part of mature faith). The shift from defensiveness to dialogical maturity is subtle but important. It reframes pluralism as a strength of faith, not a threat to it.

Even so, real implementation depends on teacher capability. Studies have found that many elementary and junior high school teachers demonstrate limited conceptual understanding of pluralism and religious moderation, often relying on moralistic slogans such as “*kita semua bersaudara*” (we are all brothers) without deeper theological or civic engagement (Amalia et al., 2025; Arifianto, 2019; Raihani, 2018; Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018; Yusuf & Sterkens, 2015). Similarly, research on the implementation of KM indicates that teachers in rural and under-resourced areas frequently struggle to implement P5 modules involving religious diversity, citing logistical constraints, limited training, and insufficient institutional support (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Indonesia's religious education policy: while the state actively promotes interfaith harmony and the principle of *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation), the actual structure and implementation of both Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and the Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) continue to reinforce a confessional and segregated model of instruction. This tension reflects a deeper structural paradox within the curriculum itself. It is emblematic of what Apple (2004) describes as the "hidden curriculum", where educational systems transmit ideological messages not only through explicit content but also through the systematic omission of alternative perspectives and dialogical spaces. In both curricula, religious education is primarily designed to consolidate knowledge and commitment within one's own religious tradition, while offering only minimal and often superficial engagement with other faiths. As a result, pluralism is acknowledged rhetorically but remains structurally peripheral within the organization of religious instruction.

These findings align with broader scholarship on religious education and pluralism in Indonesia. Raihani (2018) observes that while educational policy increasingly adopts the language of multicultural citizenship, classroom practice often remains confined within confessional boundaries. Similarly, Menchik (2016) characterizes Indonesia's model as one of "tolerance without liberalism," where social harmony is emphasized but deeper engagement with difference is limited. The K13 curriculum reflects this pattern: coexistence is affirmed rhetorically, yet epistemic boundaries between religious traditions remain largely intact. This dynamic also resonates with Arifianto's (2019) analysis of moderation discourse operating alongside doctrinal defensiveness in religious institutions. From a curriculum theory perspective, such structuring of knowledge boundaries illustrates Apple's (2004) argument that ideology is reproduced not only through explicit content but also through the organization and omission of alternative perspectives. In this sense, K13 does not reject pluralism outright; rather, it frames it within a moralized and protective discourse that avoids sustained theological or dialogical engagement.

The Kurikulum Merdeka (KM) represents an ambitious shift in tone and pedagogical orientation. By moving from rigid, content-based objectives toward more flexible *Capaian Pembelajaran* (learning outcomes), it seeks to foster student agency, critical thinking, and character formation. Its flagship innovation, the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile), explicitly incorporates pluralism through competencies such as *Berkebinekaan Global* (Global Diversity), which encourage students to recognize and embrace cultural and religious difference as integral to national identity. Project-based learning modules under the *Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), particularly those centered on *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *Merayakan Keberagaman*, create structured opportunities for dialogical and experiential engagement with diversity. Unlike K13's largely doctrinal orientation, these initiatives reposition interfaith learning within a broader civic and ethical framework. Taken together, they signal a substantive, though not unproblematic, effort to embed pluralist values within the architecture of character and citizenship education.

Yet despite these advancements, the core structure of religious instruction under KM remains confessional and mono-religious. Students continue to study only their own religion, and no formal comparative or dialogical component is embedded within the religious education subjects themselves. While the P5 projects create openings for interfaith engagement, they remain supplementary: optional in practice, uneven in implementation, and highly dependent on school-level initiative and teacher capacity. Consequently, pluralism is positioned at the periphery of the curriculum rather than woven

into its structural core. In this respect, the reform risks exemplifying what Banks (2008) terms “decorative multiculturalism,” where diversity is symbolically affirmed but the epistemological foundations of knowledge, what counts as legitimate religious understanding and whose perspectives are included, remain largely unchanged.

The curriculum in Indonesia must also be understood as a site of political and religious negotiation. The state’s decision to maintain separate religious instruction reflects a broader strategy of managing diversity through institutional containment through recognizing and protecting religious groups while maintaining clear boundaries. This model aligns with Menchik’s (2016) notion of “tolerance without liberalism,” where harmony is preserved through regulation rather than deep pluralist engagement. As Hefner and Hefner (2011) and Hadiz (2016) suggest, Indonesia’s democratic development has involved continual negotiation between pluralism and religious authority, tensions that are mirrored in educational policy. While the confessional structure is politically pragmatic, it risks reinforcing religious silos and limiting shared civic narratives. Thus, the persistence of this model in both K13 and KM reflects ongoing contestations over religious authority, national identity, and the limits of pluralism in Indonesia’s democratic order.

Nevertheless, the KM offers meaningful openings for reimagining religious education in more inclusive and dialogical terms. The explicit inclusion of *moderasi beragama* as a stated learning outcome, together with project-based initiatives that invite students to engage real-world experiences of diversity, signals a discernible shift in the state’s ideological orientation, from defensive tolerance toward a more proactive articulation of pluralism. This shift aligns with Banks’s (2008) argument that multicultural citizenship education requires moving beyond symbolic recognition toward cultivating the competencies needed to navigate diversity in democratic societies. In the *Capaian Pembelajaran* (CP) document for Islamic Religious Education (PAI), students are encouraged to demonstrate openness to religious diversity as an expression of “mature faith,” echoing broader calls for religious literacy that frame engagement with difference as a civic competence rather than a doctrinal threat (Dinham & Francis, 2015; Jackson, 2014). This reframing positions interfaith engagement not as a risk to faith, but as a moral and civic virtue. While this represents a significant discursive shift at the policy level, its transformative potential ultimately depends on how such principles are interpreted and enacted within classroom practice.

The success of this shift, however, is uneven. Research shows that implementation of religious education reform in Indonesia varies across regions and schools, shaped by differences in teacher preparedness, local religious authority, and institutional culture (Arifianto, 2019; Yusuf & Sterkens, 2015). While urban schools may integrate P5 projects more effectively, educators in rural or conservative contexts often face constraints in facilitating interfaith dialogue. Pluralism is frequently reduced to generalized moral appeals rather than deeper theological or civic engagement (Pohl, 2006). Moreover, textbook content remains largely confessional, with other faiths referenced only briefly and without comparative depth. This study’s analysis of discourse across textbooks confirms this trend. In K13 materials, references to other religions are often couched in cautionary terms, warning students to interact respectfully while guarding their faith. In KM CPs, the tone shifts toward openness, but examples remain abstract. There is still no institutionalized practice of teaching about other religions in their own terms, what Jackson (2014) refers to as “representation through the other’s eyes.” Without such practices, the development of true religious literacy, defined by Dinham and Francis (2015) as the ability to engage with diverse worldviews intelligently and respectfully, remains limited.

Table 3 presents the comparative overview of the two curriculum frameworks, illustrating their differences in structure, interfaith integration, assessment methods, and pedagogical goals.

Table 3. Comparison of Interfaith Education Features in K13 and KM

Aspect	Kurikulum 2013 (K13)	Kurikulum Merdeka (KM)
Curriculum Format	Standardized KI/KD system	Flexible CP/P5-based outcomes
Religious Instruction Structure	Confessional, segregated by religion	Confessional, but integrated P5 modules
Interfaith Content	Minimal, moralistic tolerance themes	Explicit religious moderation and diversity themes
Moral/Ethical Focus	Obedience-focused moral education	Character-focused, contextual ethics
Mention of Other Religions	Abstract or cautionary mentions	Dialogical language encouraged
Pedagogical Flexibility	Limited, textbook-driven	High, encourages contextual adaptation
Assessment Methods	Written exams and memorization	Formative and reflective assessments
Role of Projects	Not integrated into religious subjects	Interfaith projects in P5 (optional)
Terminology Used	No explicit mention of "moderation"	Emphasis on <i>moderasi beragama</i>
Implementation Challenges	Uniformity, but less responsive to local context	Variable, depends on school capacity and teacher training

International models offer useful insights into how this structural gap might be addressed. In Germany, for instance, religious education is frequently complemented by shared ethics classes that bring students of different faiths into common moral dialogue while preserving confessional autonomy (Jackson, 2014). In South Africa, religion education is incorporated into life orientation curricula and framed around shared civic and human values, reflecting post-apartheid efforts to foster democratic citizenship through inclusive pedagogy (du Preez & Simmonds, 2021). Lebanon, despite its entrenched sectarian divisions, has experimented with interfaith curricular initiatives aimed at supporting reconciliation and post-conflict nation-building (Alayan et al., 2012). Comparative scholarship suggests that such models illustrate the possibility of balancing faith-based instruction with civic-oriented religious literacy that promotes mutual understanding and national cohesion (Gearon, 2013; Jackson, 2014).

For Indonesia, however, any shift toward integrative approaches would require careful political negotiation. As studies of religion and state governance indicate, reforms that appear to blur confessional boundaries often encounter resistance from religious authorities concerned about doctrinal dilution (Menchik, 2016). Nevertheless, the state-sponsored discourse of *moderasi beragama*, embedded in national policy frameworks, provides a strategic normative foundation for incremental reform. The central challenge lies not in articulating pluralist ideals, but in translating policy rhetoric into sustainable classroom practice.

Addressing this challenge is a multi-step process. Some examples include the creation of shared ethics or religious literacy modules that are taught across religions, which would typically fall under universal themes like compassion and stewardship while maintaining doctrinal integrity. Second, it is important to expand teacher training by incorporating interfaith pedagogy, pluralism theory and conflict-sensitive teaching strategies. Third, textbooks must be rewritten to include accurate and respectful information about other religions delivered ideally in neutral voice and yet informed through interreligious consultation. Fourth, and perhaps most important, schools should be rewarded for cultivating joint projects in which students of different faiths learn and serve together.

In the end, this may take to face quite a cross point of religious education in Indonesia. The continuation of mono-faith instruction hardens lines that increasingly misalign with the realities of a diverse, interconnected society. Simultaneously, with the emergence of new curricular frameworks like Kurikulum Merdeka (KM), there are signs that the state acknowledges the necessity of preparing students for increasingly intricate interreligious encounter. If these aspirations are to be realized, structural reforms are needed: reforms that move beyond symbolic tolerance and toward a pedagogy of genuine encounter, shared citizenship, and dialogical understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined how interfaith themes are articulated within Indonesia's religious education curricula by comparing Kurikulum 2013 (K13) and Kurikulum Merdeka (KM). The findings reveal a persistent structural tension: while both curricula are framed within Pancasila's pluralist ethos and increasingly employ the language of *moderasi beragama*, religious education remains largely confessional, segregated, and unevenly implemented.

K13 exemplifies a standardized, doctrine-centered approach in which religious diversity is acknowledged rhetorically but rarely explored substantively. Tolerance is framed as a moral obligation internal to one's own faith tradition, with limited curricular space for dialogical or comparative engagement. KM introduces important philosophical and pedagogical shifts, most notably through flexible learning outcomes and the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5), which create openings for experiential engagement with diversity. The formal inclusion of religious moderation as a competency represents a meaningful discursive advance. Yet the structural organization of religious instruction remains confessional, and interfaith engagement is positioned at the curricular margins rather than embedded within its core.

These findings underscore that curriculum reform in Indonesia operates within broader sociopolitical negotiations over religious authority, national identity, and democratic pluralism. The state's continued reliance on a confessional model reflects a strategy of managing diversity through recognition and containment through protecting religious autonomy while avoiding the contested terrain of shared religious instruction. As a result, pluralism is often framed as peaceful coexistence rather than as epistemic engagement across difference. If religious education is to contribute more fully to democratic citizenship in a plural society, reform must move beyond rhetorical affirmation toward structural integration. This includes creating formal spaces for comparative and dialogical learning, strengthening teacher preparation in interfaith pedagogy, and revising instructional materials to present religious diversity in intellectually rigorous and relationally meaningful ways.

Ultimately, transforming religious education in Indonesia requires not only curricular adjustment but a reimagining of how faith, citizenship, and national belonging intersect in public life. Kurikulum Merdeka provides a significant opportunity to advance this reimagining. Whether it fulfills

that promise will depend on sustained institutional commitment to embedding pluralism not merely as policy language, but as lived pedagogical practice.

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