

Leadership Strategy of School Principals in Manifesting Religious Moderation: The Case of Islamic Vocational Senior High Schools in East Java

Ahmad Supriyadi ¹, Muqarramah Sulaiman Kurdi ²

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia; ahmadsupriyadi@uinsatu.ac.id

² University of Groningen, The Netherlands; m.s.k.muqarramah@rug.nl

Received: 06/02/2025

Revised: 15/04/2025

Accepted: 18/05/2025

Abstract

The role of school principals in encouraging moderate attitudes toward religion amid increasing radicalism among students. This study examines school principals' leadership in implementing religious moderation at two Islamic Vocational Senior High Schools: SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek. It aims to understand the leadership style of school principals in instilling religious moderation values and the learning process and implementation of these values. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with managerial, pedagogical, sociological, and psychological approaches. The research data sources include principals, teachers, and students from both schools. Data collection techniques employ participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis employs the Miles and Huberman model, which involves data condensation, presentation, and conclusion. The theoretical studies used include leadership theory in education and religious moderation. The results show that these values occur informally and are already part of the school culture, although no written policy specifically regulates them. This process has proven effective in shaping students' moderate attitudes, increasing tolerance, and strengthening the love of the homeland in both schools.

Keywords

Counterradicalism; Islamic Education; Leadership Strategy; Moderate Attitude; Religious Moderation

Corresponding Author

Ahmad Supriyadi

Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Indonesia; ahmadsupriyadi@uinsatu.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Radicalism is a topic that is relevant to discuss in Indonesian society today. This indicates that the behavior and perpetrators of radicalism have become more massive, both verbally and actively. This radicalism is found verbally on social media (Davids, 2017), where the younger generation of Indonesians dominates social media (Sarwono, 2012). Real acts of radicalism are more often seen in several cases, such as attacks on police officers and recent preventive measures carried out by Densus 88 (Hartanti, 2023). This gives the impression that the perpetrators of radicalism are no longer adults but are also carried out by teenagers (Qodir, 2018). Efforts to protect Indonesia from acts of radicalism are certainly the responsibility of all Indonesian citizens, especially educational institutions. The seeds of radicalism that potentially divide Indonesia in the future must be minimized with education and learning that encourages students to behave in love for the homeland and accept tolerance, or in this



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case, termed "religious moderation" (Kementerian Agama, 2018). The reality that has occurred since 2017 until now, where Indonesia is busy with internal problems, certainly cannot be allowed to flow but must be solved in a preventive way, namely, instilling the values of religious moderation to adolescents while in school. This is because the future of Indonesia depends on the education and learning process in schools. The hope is that educational institutions that offer education and learning will be the solution to minimize the problem of radicalism by implementing religious moderation in schools (Sirry, 2020).

Religious moderation, which is considered a must for citizens, must certainly be able to be implemented by all school residents in educational institutions (Sulistiyowati et al., 2024). This is the responsibility of all parties, especially school principals, in overseeing religious moderation in schools. The principal is responsible for providing good direction and examples of being moderate daily (Wardani et al., 2024). This, according to Gus Dur, is the embodiment of "*Bhineka tunggal Ika*," which has been used by Indonesian citizens for centuries to realize mutual respect and appreciation for others. School principals have a great responsibility in overseeing religious moderation because Indonesia is a country that has a high potential for conflict due to the diversity of its citizens. This diversity, especially religious diversity in Indonesia, is often used as a spark in dividing Indonesian unity. The Indonesian nation experienced these times in 2017 (Lestari, 2019). In that year, polarization occurred during the contestation of the Governor election in Jakarta, which caused intolerant acts such as blasphemy (Siddik, 2022). Radicals damaged houses of worship, and the spread of hate speech on social media triggered friction between religious communities in Indonesia (Hasan, 2017).

Research on religious moderation was conducted in two schools affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), namely SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, which were chosen because they have moderate characteristics. At SMK NU Tulungagung, the focus of the study lies on the management of the principal and in-depth religious learning, including fiqh and *nahwu sharaf* subjects, which are integrated into the curriculum, even though the school has experienced indications of radicalism in one of its students. At SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, religious moderation is also instilled, allowing a comparison between the leadership of the principals in these two schools in facing the demands of religious moderation launched by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Support for religious moderation is getting stronger because Tulungagung generally has shown positive results in the moderation of its society, as explained by research by the Center for Studies at UIN Tulungagung. (Tsani & Sufirmansyah, 2023). In general, religious moderation in Tulungagung is quite good when viewed from four indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and a community accepting local culture to be practiced without opposition. The four indicators are then implemented as effective school education and learning implementation. The role of teachers and innovative and targeted policies is needed to implement the correct religious moderation (Burhanuddin & Khairuddin, 2022). Therefore, in this study, data will be explored based on the school management process, starting from the policies taken by the principal, the learning process carried out by teachers in the classroom, and then evaluated by all responsible stakeholders in the two schools.

Davis and Newstrom say that leadership is the overall pattern of a leader's actions as perceived by his employees. Leadership style represents the leader's philosophy, skills, and attitude (Davis & Newstrom, 1995). Leaders must be able to choose a leadership style according to the existing situation. If the leadership style applied is correct and appropriate, it can direct the achievement of organizational and individual goals. On the other hand, if the leadership style chosen is wrong and does not follow the existing situation, it will result in difficulties in achieving organizational goals.

The study of the principal's leadership style has been carried out by several previous researchers, such as the principal's leadership style on teacher performance (Azis & Suwatno, 2019; Elazhari et al., 2021; Haryani et al., 2022; Sulfemi, 2020). The leadership style of the principal in implementing the independent learning curriculum (Saputra & Ramadan, 2023). Analysis of the Relationship between Principal Leadership Style and Digital Literacy (Johanes et al., 2022) and the principal's leadership style

in implementing P5 in elementary schools (Awwaliyah & Nugroho, 2023). Based on the presentation of the previous study above, there are similarities in highlighting the influence of leadership style on various aspects of education, such as teacher performance (Azis & Suwatno, 2019; Elazhari et al., 2021; Haryani et al., 2022; Sulfemi, 2020). The implementation of the independent learning curriculum (Saputra & Ramadan, 2023), digital literacy (Johanes et al., 2022), and the implementation of the Pancasila student profile strengthening project (P5) (Awwaliyah & Nugroho, 2023). The difference in this study lies in the focus of the aspects being studied: while research such as Azis & Suwatno (Azis & Suwatno, 2019) and Sulfemide (Sulfemi, 2020) focuses on the impact of leadership style on teacher performance, research by Saputra & Ramadan (2023) and Johannes et al. (2022) focuses on the role of leadership in implementing the new curriculum and digital literacy, which is more related to adaptation to policy and technology changes in schools. The research by Awwaliyah & Nugroho (2023) focuses on implementing character values through P5 in elementary schools. The position of this research is in the same framework as previous studies, which is to examine the influence of school principals' leadership styles on specific aspects of education. Still, the focus can develop new understandings on aspects that have not been widely discussed, such as technology integration or leadership approaches in educational innovation.

Based on the previous explanation, this study will focus on examining (1) the leadership style of the principal in instilling the values of religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, (2) the learning process that instills the value of religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, and (3) the implementation of religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek. This research focuses on completing a study on religious moderation to provide insight and answers to questions about the importance of religious moderation carried out in the two schools.

2. METHODS

This research is field research, with a Qualitative descriptive research type (Moleong, 2005). This study uses four approaches: managerial, pedagogical, sociological, and psychological. A managerial approach is used to research the management of radicalism prevention in schools; a pedagogical approach to evaluating teachers' abilities in learning; a sociological approach to understanding school stakeholder cooperation; and psychological approaches to find out the strategies of school principals in implementing moderate education. The researcher took the research location at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek. The reason for choosing SMK NU Tulungagung is that it is affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has moderate characteristics. The data sources in this study are principals, teachers, and students in the two schools.

This study uses three data collection techniques: (a) Participant observation to directly observe the behavior of school principals, teachers, students, and activities in schools related to religious moderation; (b) In-depth interviews with school principals, teachers, and students to explore leadership in the implementation of religious moderation; (c) Documentation to complete data from documents such as academic handbooks and lesson plans. The researcher used two stages of data analysis: single data analysis in each school (SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek) and cross-case analysis. Data were analyzed through three stages: before, during, and after the field using the Miles and Huberman method, which included data condensation (selection, focusing, summarizing, simplifying the data), presenting the data (narratives, charts, matrices), and drawing conclusions to find new findings that were re-verified (Miles et al., 2013). The cross-site analysis compared and combined the findings from SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek. The findings from each school are categorized and formulated into substantive theories are compared to find differences and similarities. The result is a cross-case proposition to compile a comprehensive theoretical finding.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Leadership Strategies of Religious Moderation in Vocational Schools

The leadership style of school principals largely influences the implementation of religious moderation in schools. This is evident in the cases of SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, where both principals have demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering religious moderation through various strategic approaches (Asy'ari et al., 2021). While each school operates within its unique context, a comparative analysis reveals both shared strategies and distinct methods tailored to their respective school environments. At SMK NU Tulungagung, religious moderation is embedded in the school culture through consistent evaluation, structured routines, and a strong emphasis on the values of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama). The principal conducts continuous assessments of the implementation of religious moderation, which serves as a foundation for refining strategies and introducing recommendations (Bush & Glover, 2016). These include expanding the scope of religious moderation beyond traditional subjects, involving civic education, and equipping teachers with the necessary understanding of moderate religious values (Asy'ari et al., 2021). Teacher recruitment also reflects a commitment to moderation, with background checks ensuring alignment with inclusive religious views. In addition, collaboration with external institutions such as local NU branches and community leaders helps reinforce the school's ideological orientation toward moderation (Asy'ari et al., 2021). These partnerships support various programs that promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

In parallel, SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek integrates religious moderation through learning materials, local content subjects (Mulok), and extracurricular activities like PHBI (Islamic Holiday Commemorations). The principal emphasizes modeling moderate behavior and relies on voluntary engagement from staff and student organizations like IPNU-IPPNU (Hefner, 2019). Despite the absence of formal regulations, the culture of moderation is sustained through shared understanding and active participation. The school also emphasizes student-centered learning, where discussions about pluralism, tolerance, and mutual respect are embedded into classroom interactions (Dzaky, 2021). This pedagogical approach empowers students to become critical thinkers who respectfully and informally navigate religious differences. Both schools utilize religious teachers as strategic change agents (Sukanto et al., 2023). At SMK NU Tulungagung, these teachers are given specific responsibilities to guide students in practicing moderate religious values, supported by structured routines such as morning Qur'an reading, *dhuha* prayer, and *tahlil* (Sudirman, 2021). These practices help create a disciplined and spiritually reflective environment that upholds the values of moderation. Meanwhile, at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, religious moderation is reinforced through diverse religious instruction and open dialogue, with guest teachers from different religious backgrounds serving as an indirect measure of tolerance and inclusivity among students and staff (Hefner, 2019). This exposure to multiple perspectives is crucial in cultivating an openness and mutual appreciation among the school community.

Instrumental in both schools is the involvement of multiple stakeholders. At SMK NU Tulungagung, the strategy includes input from student affairs, internal teacher groups (MGMP), and guidance counselors who contribute to developing a moderation guidebook. This guidebook acts as a reference for teachers and students, offering guidelines on promoting moderation both in and outside the classroom. SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek (Prasetyo & Laksono, 2023). On the other hand, religious teachers and student organizations rely on the collaborative input to develop informal yet effective strategies (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). The school encourages feedback from students and fosters open forums for discussion, which strengthens communal bonds and allows for early detection of potential issues related to radicalism or intolerance (Bush & Glover, 2016). The evaluation process in both institutions highlights a shared belief in continuous improvement. For SMK NU Tulungagung, this involves interpreting teacher and student behavior changes as indicators of success. They track improvements in attitudes, participation in religious activities, and engagement with diverse

perspectives. At SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, feedback from parent-teacher meetings and the smooth interaction with non-Muslim teachers are key indicators (Hefner, 2019). These signs indicate a healthy school environment where inclusivity and respect are deeply rooted in daily interactions (Diantoro, 2022).

In conclusion, the leadership strategies at both SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek reflect a proactive and adaptive approach to religious moderation (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). While SMK NU emphasizes structured routines, formal evaluations, and institutional partnerships, SMK Islam 1 leans on communal values, voluntary participation, and pedagogical innovation (Bush & Glover, 2016; Hefner, 2019). Both models offer valuable insights into how vocational schools can cultivate religious moderation as a core educational value. These approaches, when documented and shared widely, have the potential to serve as blueprints for other schools seeking to foster peaceful and inclusive educational environments across Indonesia.

Learning Process in Building Religious Moderation Values at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek

The principals' commitment to implementing religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek must be appreciated, as their leadership forms and patterns are pivotal in fostering moderate Islamic values (Sukanto et al., 2023). These values are integrated into the learning process through various instruments, such as the curriculum, which includes Aswaja an-Nahdliyah content to support religious moderation. These values are applied effectively, efficiently, and measurably, with assessments tailored to evaluate students' understanding and behavior (Tsani & Sufirmansyah, 2023). Both schools employ specific measuring tools to assess the implementation of religious moderation. At SMK NU Tulungagung, programs are evaluated, and students are monitored through liaison books and interviews with parents. Teachers assess students' moderate attitudes by observing their social behavior, communication styles, and associations. Similarly, at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, affective assessments and cognitive and psychomotor tools are used to evaluate students' behavior. Teachers also incorporate activities like singing "*Syubbanul Wathan*" to instill a love for the homeland, a key trait of moderation (Izza, 2022).

Teachers at both schools integrate religious moderation values into their subjects, even in non-religious disciplines like Mathematics and Science. At SMK NU Tulungagung, moderation values are woven into lessons through stories of scholars and case studies. At the same time, at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, teachers use viral social phenomena as concrete examples to explain moderation. Both schools emphasize character education, such as *tawasuth* (moderation) and *tasamuh* (tolerance), and encourage students to adopt moderate behaviors in their daily lives (Naim et al., 2022). Although neither school has formal written policies on religious moderation, the principals provide verbal and practical support. At SMK NU Tulungagung, the principal encourages teachers to embed moderation values in their lessons and promotes activities like tahlil and Dhuha prayers. Similarly, at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, the principal indirectly guides teachers to include moderation values, particularly through NU-based activities. Both schools use habituation programs outside the classroom, such as religious activities and community engagement, to reinforce these values (Naim et al., 2023). Teachers at both institutions observe students' behavior during and outside class to assess their adherence to moderation principles. At SMK NU Tulungagung, teachers monitor students' interactions and manners, while at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, evaluations are conducted during religious activities like Ramadan boarding school programs. Both schools report no instances of radicalism among students, attributing this success to consistently implementing moderation values in learning and daily practices (Utami, 2022).

In conclusion, SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek strongly commit to fostering religious moderation through tailored learning processes, teacher initiatives, and principal support. While formal policies are absent, the schools' holistic approaches combining curriculum

integration, behavioral assessments, and extracurricular activities effectively cultivate moderate student attitudes.

Religious Moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek: A Comparative Analysis

Religious moderation has become a cornerstone in the educational frameworks of SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek. Both schools prioritize integrating moderate religious values into their curricula, fostering environments that promote tolerance, understanding, and academic excellence. This section synthesizes the findings from both institutions, offering a comparative interpretation supported by references to existing literature on religious moderation in education. At SMK NU Tulungagung, teachers and students readily embraced religious moderation, particularly due to the alignment with the *ahlussunnah wal jamaah an-nahdliyah* tradition. Students reported positive learning experiences, citing teachers as role models of moderate behavior. One student, Moh. Alfin Sulthon scored 90 in religious studies, attributing this success to the accessible and non-complicated material (Interview, SMK NU Tulungagung). Similarly, SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek observed high participation in religious activities like *Makesta* and IPNU-IPPNU, with students expressing joy and voluntary engagement. A student scored above 85 in affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains, crediting the teacher's effective delivery of moderation values (Interview, SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek).

The positive reception at both schools underscores the importance of teacher exemplification and curriculum design in fostering religious moderation. This aligns with studies by Azra, which highlight the role of educators in modelling moderate attitudes to prevent radical tendencies among students (Azra, 2019). Neither school had formal written policies mandating religious moderation. Instead, values were subtly integrated into lessons and school culture. For instance, a teacher at SMK NU Tulungagung mentioned, "There is no mandatory regulation, but moderation values are indirectly included" (Interview, SMK NU Tulungagung). The same approach was observed at SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, where moderation was woven into subjects like *fiqh* and *mulok* without explicit directives. The organic integration of moderation reflects a bottom-up approach, which, as noted by Hashim (2020), can be more sustainable than top-down mandates (Hashim, 2020). However, the absence of formal policies raises questions about consistency and scalability, as discussed in Berger's work on institutionalizing religious moderation (Berger, 2018).

Both schools reported improved academic performance and moral behavior among students. The absence of radical or extreme attitudes was particularly emphasized, with students describing their environments as "all moderate here" (Interviews, both schools). These outcomes resonate with the findings of Parker, who argues that religious moderation in education correlates with reduced extremism and enhanced social cohesion (Parker, 2021). The cases of SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek exemplify this linkage. Implementing religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating moderate values through teacher exemplification and informal curriculum inclusion. While both schools achieved commendable results, the lack of formal policies suggests an area for future development to ensure long-term sustainability. These cases contribute to broader discourse on the role of education in promoting religious harmony, as scholars like Azra, Hashim, and Berger advocate.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion previously presented about the leadership of the principal in overseeing religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek, it can be concluded in several points as follows: (1) The leadership style of the principals of SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek in the implementation of religious moderation in

schools is carried out by providing direction and freedom to teachers regarding how to implement it in the classroom. Therefore, the leadership style carried out by the two schools above is delegative. (2) The learning process that instills the value of religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek has been carried out well by teachers informally. This is in line with the fact that occurred in the two schools that teachers are able and willing to include the values of religious moderation in the learning process. In the learning process, teachers have included the values of religious moderation voluntarily, without waiting for written instructions from the principal (Subchi et al., 2022). (3) The implementation of religious moderation at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam 1 Durenan Trenggalek is based on data that reflects students' abilities measured by clear procedures and criteria, not detrimental to students, open, appropriate, and systematic assessment in terms of techniques, procedures, and results. Therefore, the defense process at SMK NU Tulungagung and SMK Islam Durenan Trenggalek can be said to be learning that successfully implements the values of religious moderation in schools.

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