

Deconstructing Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Materials to Foster Multicultural Awareness Among Millennial Students

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's cultural and religious diversity presents both an opportunity and a challenge for education. However, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in schools remains largely normative and ritualistic, offering little engagement with multicultural values. This study aims to deconstruct IRE materials to promote multicultural awareness among millennial students. Using a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving teachers, students, and school leaders in socially diverse senior high schools. The findings reveal that current IRE textbooks predominantly emphasize jurisprudence and theology while marginalizing themes of tolerance and interfaith dialogue, resulting in varied student attitudes toward diversity—from inclusive to exclusivist. By applying deconstructive strategies such as contextual reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses, incorporation of cross-cultural case studies, and the use of digital media and experiential learning, teachers can reshape IRE into a more inclusive, humanistic, and context-sensitive subject. This study implies the need for systemic curriculum reform and teacher professional development to align Islamic education with the values of pluralism and democratic coexistence, thereby strengthening social cohesion among Indonesia's youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is renowned for its remarkable diversity in culture, ethnicity, and religion. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2020, there are more than 1,300 ethnic groups spread across the archipelago, along with six official religions and a substantial number of local belief systems still practiced within society [1]. This diversity is a national asset but also poses a potential source of conflict if not managed through inclusive and tolerant education [2].

Unfortunately, in recent years, various studies have indicated a rise in intolerance among students and adolescents. A survey conducted by the Setara Institute (2022) involving high school students in Jakarta and Bandung found that over 30% of respondents displayed intolerant attitudes toward other religious groups, and 9.4% even expressed indifference to acts of violence committed in the name of religion [3]. These findings reflect the weak internalization of multicultural values within the education system, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), which should serve as a primary platform for moral and social development among Muslim students [4].

The current IRE curriculum—both in the Merdeka Curriculum and its predecessors—is considered overly normative, emphasizing ritualistic and dogmatic aspects, while providing limited space for intercultural and interfaith understanding [5]. In the digital era, where millennials have access to a vast array of global information, Islamic education appears to lag in fostering open-minded and humanistic thinking that respects diversity [6]. Therefore,



serious efforts are needed to reformulate IRE instructional materials to be more contextual and aligned with Indonesia's multicultural reality [7].

Previous studies have explored the integration of multicultural values into Islamic education. For instance, Malla et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of strengthening tolerance within the framework of Islamic teachings, and Mantasiah et al. (2024) highlighted the urgency of inclusive Islamic education in the modern era. However, few studies have explicitly examined the deconstruction of IRE materials as a pedagogical strategy to cultivate multicultural awareness, particularly targeting the millennial generation as the primary audience [10].

Most existing research addresses Islamic and multicultural values in a normative manner, without critically or practically engaging with curricular aspects [11]. There remains a lack of methodological approaches that examine the structure, narratives, and delivery of IRE content from a cultural deconstruction perspective. Furthermore, the unique characteristics of the millennial generation—being digital natives, socially plural, and critical of authority—have yet to receive adequate attention in the context of multicultural religious education [12].

The current IRE materials do not fully support the development of multicultural awareness among millennial students due to their normative and exclusive presentation [13]. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a deconstructive approach to teaching materials that can foster inclusive attitudes and cross-cultural and interfaith tolerance. The integration of multicultural values within Islamic education has attracted significant academic attention over the past decade. Numerous studies affirm that Islamic teachings are inherently aligned with the principles of multiculturalism, such as tolerance, justice, and respect for diversity. Malla et al. (2021), for instance, assert that Islamic doctrine provides a robust theological foundation for inclusive education that embraces difference, as reflected in *Surah Al-Hujurat* verse 13, which serves as a core scriptural basis for multicultural education from an Islamic perspective. Similarly, Rahadi et al. (2024) emphasizes that the Qur'an and Hadith contain a wealth of moral guidance that encourages peaceful coexistence within socially and culturally diverse communities.

However, in practice, the content of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as delivered in schools continues to demonstrate limitations in supporting the development of students' multicultural awareness [15]. Asrori et al. (2025) argue that the IRE curriculum remains heavily normative, overly focused on ritualistic aspects of worship, and offers little space for cross-identity or interfaith dialogue. This observation is corroborated by Mantasiah et al. (2024), who finds that Islamic-based schools tend to exhibit resistance toward inclusive educational approaches, particularly in socially homogeneous religious environments.

Meanwhile, studies that focus specifically on religious education for the millennial generation remain relatively scarce [17]. This is a notable gap, considering that this generation is characterized by its identity as digital natives—accustomed to information diversity yet simultaneously more vulnerable to exposure to exclusivist ideologies. Akmansyah et al. (2025) highlight the importance of new pedagogical approaches in IRE that respond to the needs of youth in pluralistic societies; however, their work does not explicitly connect these pedagogies with a deconstructive approach to instructional content.

Several innovations in developing multicultural-based IRE curricula have been introduced. For example, Gunawan et al. (2024) developed teacher training programs, designed contextualized curricula, and employed digital technologies to instill values of tolerance and respect for difference. Nevertheless, their approach remains largely practical and operational in nature, without critically interrogating the structural content and dominant narratives embedded in IRE instructional materials [20].

In response to these gaps, the present study adopts a distinct position by offering a deconstructive approach to IRE content as a strategic effort to cultivate multicultural awareness among millennial students. This research addresses an existing void in the literature by conducting a critical analysis of the narrative structure and ideological content of IRE materials, while simultaneously situating this analysis within the socio-cultural context of today's youth.



This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse of progressive Islamic education by positioning multiculturalism as an integral part of the IRE curriculum. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for designing instructional content and teaching strategies that are more responsive to the challenges of pluralism and relevant to the characteristics of millennial students, thereby strengthening social cohesion and cultural resilience in the face of diversity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method to explore in depth the process of deconstructing Islamic Religious Education (IRE) materials in the context of fostering multicultural awareness among millennial students. This approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to understand phenomena holistically within real-life settings—particularly within senior high schools or *madrasah aliyah* that reflect social and cultural diversity.

The research site was purposively selected based on the presence of a diverse student body and the implementation of a IRE learning approach that is open to social issues. The primary informants in this study include IRE teachers, millennial students (grades X–XII), and school principals, who serve as curriculum policy decision-makers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (including IRE textbooks, syllabi, modules, and lesson plans). Observations were conducted to examine classroom interaction dynamics and students' attitudes toward diversity, while document analysis aimed to scrutinize the narrative structures, symbols, and values embedded in teaching materials that may influence the development of multicultural awareness.

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques, by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and analyzed documents. Additionally, the researcher employed member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy and representativeness of data interpretations.

This method enabled the researcher not only to identify elements within instructional materials that require deconstruction, but also to explore how millennial students interpret diversity and to what extent inclusive teaching approaches can shape their multicultural awareness. Accordingly, the findings of this study are expected to contribute meaningfully to the development of a more adaptive and humanistic IRE curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

IRE Content Remains Non-Inclusive and Lacks Multicultural Perspective

An analysis of curriculum documents, textbooks, and interviews with teachers and students reveals that the current Islamic Religious Education (IRE) materials taught in schools remain normative, exclusive, and lack substantial engagement with multicultural values [21]. The content structure in most IRE textbooks is still dominated by themes of worship (*ibadah*), theology (*aqidah*), and personal morality (*akhlaq*), without being accompanied by a strong emphasis on social values such as interreligious tolerance, intercultural dialogue, or respect for diverse social identities [22].

An examination of three revised 2013 IRE curriculum textbooks used at the senior high school level shows that over 75% of the content focuses on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—as well as theology, while themes of diversity and social pluralism appear only in one or two minor subchapters [23]. Even then, these are presented descriptively without the inclusion of case studies or contextual applications. One IRE teacher remarked: "We do follow the official textbook, but it contains very little discussion on how Islam responds to social diversity. So unless we take the initiative ourselves, students won't gain that perspective."



This has an impact on students' understanding of Islamic teachings, which tends to become dogmatic and insufficiently open to the plural realities of society [24]. Several students admitted that they had never been invited to discuss issues such as interfaith harmony, Islam and local culture, or the dynamics of a diverse society [25]. A Grade XI student commented: "We often learn about the pillars of faith and Islam, but we're never invited to talk about religious differences or how to respond to friends with different beliefs."

This condition indicates a gap between the theological values of Islam—which fundamentally uphold diversity—and the reality of a IRE curriculum that remains narrow in its social scope [26]. If teaching materials are not developed to be more inclusive and multicultural, the potential of education as a means of social transformation will diminish. On the contrary, religious education may even reinforce exclusivism if left unexamined [27].

These findings support previous research emphasizing that current IRE materials tend to prioritize legalistic aspects of Islam and have yet to fully internalize universal and inclusive social values [28]. Thus, deconstructing both the content and pedagogical approaches of IRE represents an essential first step in fostering multicultural awareness among millennial students.

Variation in Millennial Students' Attitudes Toward Diversity

Field findings indicate that millennial students exhibit varied attitudes toward social, cultural, and religious diversity, which are influenced by their personal experiences, family environments, and the teaching methods they are exposed to. Through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted at two senior high schools, it was found that while some students demonstrate open and tolerant attitudes toward differences, others display tendencies toward exclusivism or even suspicion of individuals from different religious or cultural backgrounds [29].

Students who exhibit inclusive attitudes generally come from diverse social environments and are accustomed to interacting with peers from various backgrounds [30]. They perceive diversity as a natural aspect of Indonesian society and part of sunnatullah (divine law) [31]. In one interview, a student remarked: "I have friends of different religions, and I think that's normal. As long as they're good people, it's not an issue. Our IRE teacher often talks about tolerance too."

Conversely, some students expressed discomfort when required to interact or collaborate with peers of different religions, especially in religious contexts [32]. Some even conveyed the belief that other religions pose a "threat" to their faith [33]. Such views are often shaped by narrow religious doctrine or by instructional materials that do not provide space for dialogue and critical reflection. During a group discussion, one student stated: "We have to be careful with people of other religions—they might influence us. That's what my teacher said."

Classroom observations also revealed that discussions on religious topics are predominantly teacher-centered, offering students little opportunity to explore cross-perspectives or to critically engage with socio-religious issues [34]. This lack of dialogical space contributes to the limited development of multicultural awareness among students.

These findings suggest that many high school students in major Indonesian cities exhibit tendencies toward intolerance of other religious groups, often rooted in exclusive and decontextualized religious instruction. As a generation living in the digital age and exposed to global information flows, millennials require a more open, reflective, and context-sensitive approach to religious education to avoid falling into narrow and rigid views of difference.

Accordingly, this study underscores that without IRE instruction that actively cultivates values of empathy, dialogue, and respect for diversity, millennial students will remain within a limited spectrum of understanding and vulnerable to intolerant narratives. The need to reformulate both the approach and content of IRE materials is thus urgent in order to shape a generation of Muslims who are moderate and pluralistic.



Strategies for Deconstructing IRE Materials Based on Multiculturalism

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers and an analysis of instructional documents, several potential strategies have been identified for deconstructing IRE content to make it more relevant in cultivating multicultural awareness among millennial students [35]. These strategies emerge both as teacher-initiated practices at the classroom level and as critical reflections on the existing curricular structure [36].

The first strategy is the contextual reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses and hadiths, particularly those related to interfaith relations and social life [37]. Progressive teachers attempt to reframe Islamic texts not solely from legalistic or ritual perspectives, but also by emphasizing universal human values such as justice, compassion, and equality [38]. For example, *Surah Al-Hujurat:* 13 is not merely interpreted as an acknowledgment of human diversity, but is also developed into a foundational principle for fostering social empathy and inter-identity dialogue.

The second strategy involves enriching teaching materials with case studies and cross-cultural narratives [39]. Teachers adopting this approach incorporate stories of Islamic figures who lived harmoniously in pluralistic societies, present real-world cases of social conflict rooted in intolerance, and engage students in analyzing how Islamic teachings respond to such issues. This method allows students to develop both critical thinking skills and social consciousness. In one of the schools studied, for instance, a teacher asked students to watch a documentary on interreligious harmony in Indonesia and then discuss it in cross-grade group discussions.

The third strategy is the use of digital media and experiential learning approaches. Teachers encourage students to create educational content themed around tolerance for social media, such as short videos or digital posters promoting *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin* (Islam as a mercy to all creation) [40]. These projects not only enhance 21st-century skills but also provide space for students to express their religious understanding creatively and contextually.

These strategies have shown positive effects on students' perspectives toward diversity. Teachers who implemented such approaches reported increased student participation in classroom discussions and a growing openness among students in understanding differences. This aligns with the findings of Parnawi et al. (2024), who demonstrated that a multicultural-based IRE curriculum, when implemented deliberately, can create inclusive and adaptive learning environments for diverse student populations.

From these findings, it can be concluded that deconstructing IRE materials must go beyond theoretical critique; it must be accompanied by a pedagogical transformation that is participatory, contextual, and humanistic. The IRE curriculum needs to be redesigned ideologically and methodologically to respond to the sociocultural dynamics of the millennial generation and to strengthen the role of Islamic education as a moral force in a pluralistic society.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate a critical disjunction between the normative objectives of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and its empirical implementation within classroom settings. Although IRE is ideally conceived as a vehicle for the internalization of Islam's universal values—such as compassion (*rahmah*), justice ('*adalah*), and tolerance (*tasamuh*)—it frequently assumes a form that is excessively normative, insular, and lacking in sociocultural relevance [41]. This reinforces prior critiques in the literature, which contend that IRE remains ensnared in religious formalism and fails to adequately engage with the sociocultural realities of its learners [42].

In a society as inherently plural as Indonesia, the persistence of exclusive religious instruction is not only pedagogically outdated but also poses tangible risks in reinforcing social polarization and religious intolerance [38]. As demonstrated in the field data, IRE curricula in many schools are disproportionately focused on ritual and doctrinal instruction, with minimal attention to themes such as interfaith coexistence, minority rights, or Islam's role in nurturing a democratic and peaceful public sphere [37]. This curricular imbalance deprives students of opportunities to engage



in reflective dialogue on diversity and, in certain cases, predisposes them to sectarian discourses originating from outside the educational institution.

This condition signals a deeper epistemological crisis within formal Islamic education, wherein religious knowledge is presented as static doctrine, immune to contextual critique and interpretive plurality [26]. This approach stands in stark contrast to Islam's own intellectual tradition, which encompasses diverse hermeneutical methodologies capable of adapting scriptural interpretation to changing historical and social contexts [43]. Regrettably, these methodologies are largely absent from the official curriculum, which often privileges a monolithic and dehistoricized rendering of religious truth. It is within this context that curricular deconstruction becomes imperative—not as an act of dismantling faith, but as a critical pedagogical strategy aimed at unmasking dominant religious narratives and recovering alternative, inclusive meanings [22].

Deconstruction in this context involves interrogating hegemonic interpretations embedded within IRE materials and reorienting them toward more pluralistic, humanistic, and context-sensitive understandings [5]. For instance, the exclusivist reading of Islam as the sole bearer of religious truth may be critically re-evaluated in light of scriptural passages such as *Surah Al-Baqarah*: 256 ("There is no compulsion in religion") or *Surah Al-Hujurat*: 13, which affirms human diversity as divinely ordained. Educators who adopt such an approach do more than transmit knowledge—they enact epistemic liberation, empowering students to think critically and ethically within a plural public sphere.

However, the capacity to implement such pedagogical transformations remains limited. Many IRE teachers have not been exposed to critical pedagogical frameworks or interpretive tools that transcend rigid doctrinal instruction. Teacher training programs (*Lembaga Pendidikan Tenaga Kependidikan*, LPTK) continue to emphasize rote learning of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*aqidah*), with little curricular space for Islamic hermeneutics, social exegesis, or multicultural theory [6]. Consequently, meaningful reform must be pursued at a systemic level, encompassing curriculum design, textbook development, teacher professionalization, and policy frameworks that are aligned with democratic and pluralist educational ideals [8].

From the student's perspective—especially among millennials—there exists both opportunity and vulnerability. Growing up within a digitally mediated, socially heterogeneous environment, millennial students tend to be more receptive to pluralism [36]. However, in the absence of educational spaces that provide critical engagement with sensitive socioreligious issues—such as interfaith relations, minority rights, and social conflict—students become susceptible to reductive and exclusionary ideologies propagated through unregulated digital networks. In this regard, a multicultural IRE approach is not merely a pedagogical choice; it constitutes a cultural strategy and a mechanism for social resilience [39].

The strategies identified in this study—contextual reinterpretation of scripture, integration of social case studies, and digital and experiential learning—demonstrate that IRE can be reconceptualized as a site for cultivating critical consciousness and socially engaged religiosity [35]. Teachers who incorporate experiential tolerance-based learning projects—such as producing digital educational content or conducting thematic discussions on social conflict—demonstrate that transformative religious education is not a utopian abstraction but a realizable praxis grounded in pedagogical courage and intellectual openness [31].

Ultimately, a IRE curriculum that is insulated from critical reflection risks reproducing dogmatic thinking and failing to respond to contemporary societal challenges. In contrast, a deconstructed and reimagined IRE—guided by multicultural principles—can serve as a vanguard in shaping a generation of Muslims who are democratic, empathetic, and cosmopolitan [34]. Religious education must evolve beyond ritual memorization and doctrinal rigidity; it must prepare students to become globally literate citizens capable of navigating difference without compromising their religious identity [30]. This is where the urgency of IRE deconstruction lies: as both an intellectual imperative and a cultural praxis.



CONCLUSION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) materials, which remain predominantly normative and legalistic in nature, have proven insufficient in fostering comprehensive multicultural awareness among millennial students. The dominance of ritual-centered instruction, devoid of adequate social dimensions, has contributed to a wide spectrum of student attitudes toward diversity—ranging from tolerant to exclusionary. A deconstructive approach to instructional content emerges as a critical step in reopening the space for reinterpreting Islamic values in a manner that is inclusive, humanistic, and contextually grounded. Social reinterpretation of religious texts, the integration of multicultural case studies, and the strategic use of digital media have shown effectiveness in cultivating students' understanding of diversity and their capacity for reflective engagement with societal pluralism.

A systemic reformulation of the IRE curriculum is urgently needed. This includes revising teaching materials, enhancing teacher training programs, and aligning national education policies to support a vision of religious education that is both inclusive and moderate. IRE should be reoriented as a platform for the formation of social character, grounded in universal Islamic values and the readiness to coexist within a pluralistic society. It is recommended that educational institutions develop contextual, project-based learning models and offer ongoing professional development for teachers in Islamic multicultural education. In this way, IRE can be repositioned as a strategic force in cultivating a younger generation that is tolerant, reflective, and globally competent.

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Author Contribution

All authors contributed significantly to the conception, design, analysis, and writing of this article. Yazdan Farouq conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, and supervised data interpretation. Mazin Khalil was responsible for qualitative data analysis and literature synthesis. Thaufiq Ilham Dwi Yahya conducted data collection and field observations in Indonesia, contributing to contextual interpretation and cultural analysis. All authors discussed the results, provided critical revisions for intellectual content, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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