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Teachers Navigating Faith and Inquiry Across Three School Types in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines how teachers in three types of Indonesian lower secondary schools—a general lower secondary (SMP), a madrasah (MTs), and a traditional pesantren—navigate the tension between cultivating religious faith and fostering critical inquiry. Qualitatively designed, the study employed purposive sampling to select teachers, principals, and vice principals from three school types under a single educational foundation. Data were gathered through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed thematically to explore how Islamic education is understood and practiced. The findings of this study indicate that Islamic education in Indonesia's lower secondary schools—across SMP, MTs, and pesantren—is a dynamic and context-sensitive practice shaped by institutional ethos, teacher interpretations, and local socio-cultural realities. The tension between faith and inquiry, a central theme in Islamic educational theory, is not experienced as a binary but negotiated along a continuum. Teachers support questioning to varying degrees, with SMP allowing guided inquiry, MTs placing faith-based boundaries, and pesantren emphasizing critical thinking within Islamic sciences. Integration of religious and secular knowledge also ranges from ethical linkages to philosophical unification, depending on institutional vision and pedagogical approach. Despite challenges, all three school types show selective adaptation to technological, curricular, and societal changes—preserving Islamic values while engaging with contemporary demands. This confirms that Islamic education in Indonesia is an evolving project—shaped by the people, context, and purposes it serves.

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Introduction

Islamic education has become increasingly a key focus globally, particularly in response to the rapid advancements in technology, globalization, and socio-political shifts, which demand more diverse and flexible educational frameworks—simply said, an educational change (Zaman & Memon, 2015; Sahin, 2018; Ali, 2024). It is increasingly expected to contribute to broader societal goals such as supporting democratic processes, promoting religious tolerance, fostering interfaith dialogue to counter extremism, and addressing global challenges like climate change through environmental education and sustainable practices (Hefner, 2007; Parker, 2014; Parker & Raihani, 2011; Parker, 2016). These expectations are significant considering the global Muslim population, which exceeds 1.9 billion, or 24.1% of the world's population, and that despite demographically significance, Muslims, on average, receive fewer years of formal education compared to other religious groups—5.6 years, compared to 9.3 years for Christians and 13.4 years for Jews (Pew Research, 2016).

Meanwhile, there have been ongoing reflexive theoretical and practical conversations at different levels to produce contextually relevant and workable tensions for solutions (Rayess, 2020; Arjmand, 2018; Sahin, 2018; Saadallah, 2018). For instance, Rissanen (2012) observed that Islamic education has operated as a field of negotiation, where educators balance religious teachings with the expectations of a pluralistic society. Tan's findings (2011, 2014) have highlighted the existence of educative tradition that underscores ongoing negotiation between preserving traditions and promoting pluralism, rationality, and autonomy.

In Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, Islamic education operates within a diverse institutional landscape, from state secular schools that offer limited religious instruction, to madrasah and pesantren that prioritize religious education, and more recently, integrated Islamic schools that blend religious and secular content (Azra et al., 2007; Hasan, 2009; Lukens-Bull, 2019). This diversity reflects ongoing efforts to balance tradition with modernity, and to respond to both community expectations and state educational policies.

Yet, despite increasing scholarly attention to Islamic education, much of the literature has focused on institutional reforms, curriculum debates, or philosophical tensions, with relatively less attention to the perspectives and everyday agency of teachers—those who translate educational ideals into practice. This gap is particularly pressing in contexts like Indonesia, where diverse school types coexist and Islamic education is both evolving and contested. This study addresses this gap by examining how teachers interpret and navigate tensions between faith and inquiry within their specific institutional settings. By capturing their narratives across SMP, MTs, and pesantren, it offers a novel, grounded perspective on how Islamic education is practiced on the ground, highlighting teachers as key agents in shaping its contemporary meanings. This study thus contributes by highlighting how Islamic education is interpreted and enacted across distinct school types through teachers' daily pedagogical work.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to capture the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of educators working within distinct institutional contexts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Participants included teachers, principals, and vice principals from three schools located in Cirebon, West Jawa, operating under the same educational foundation. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with direct involvement in teaching, curriculum design, and educational leadership. Teachers from both religious and secular disciplines were included to represent diverse perspectives on pedagogy and content integration (Patton, 2002; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. FGDs were conducted separately for each school type, creating space for dialogue grounded in the specific institutional and pedagogical contexts of each setting. Semi-structured interviews enabled deeper individual reflection, allowing participants to articulate their interpretations of Islamic education and describe classroom practices in detail (Morgan, 1997; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was both inductive—responsive to emerging patterns—and guided by the study's conceptual interests, such as how teachers define Islamic education, how they manage the relationship between faith and inquiry, and how their schools respond to socio-cultural and technological change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This

iterative process helped identify key themes that structure the findings presented in the subsequent sections. To ensure the credibility of the data, this study employed triangulation through the use of multiple data sources (teachers, principals, and vice principals) across three different school types (SMP, MTs, and pesantren), as well as multiple methods (focus group discussions and individual informal interviews). This methodological and source triangulation allowed for cross-validation of emerging themes. Additionally, interpretations were refined through researcher reflexivity and iterative coding, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' actual narratives and institutional contexts.

Results and Discussion

An overview of Islamic education in Indonesia's schools

In terms of Islamic education in Indonesia, schools adopt distinct approaches to blending faith and inquiry within their educational frameworks (Azra et al., 2015; 2018). *First*, general-secular schools (primary, lower, and upper secondary), whether private or state-owned, include Islamic education for Muslims as part of the compulsory religious education curriculum, called *Pendidikan Agama Islam* (Islamic Religious Education, PAI), which is equally enacted to adherents of other faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These schools follow the national curriculum, offering core subjects such as mathematics, science, social studies, and Indonesian. *Second*, formal Islamic faith-based schools (*madrasah*), whether private or state-owned, emphasize religious studies alongside general subjects (Azra, 2018; Zuhri & Syamsia, 2023). While they also follow the national curriculum, they place a stronger emphasis on Islamic education, dividing it into specific subjects like *Quran* and *Hadith*, *aqidah-akhlaq* (creed and manners), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and Arabic.

Third, *pesantrens* are generally traditional Islamic boarding schools that have historically focused primarily on religious education, offering in-depth studies of religious texts, often in a residential setting where students live and learn under the guidance of religious teachers (Azra et al., 2007; Azra, 2018). Administratively, there are now two types: a *pesantren* that operates as an umbrella organization, running modern schools enriched with *pesantren* content and subjects, mainly at the lower and upper secondary levels and the second type remains focused on teaching religious subjects in a more informal setting. In the latter case, many students attend formal schools during the day and study in their *pesantren* in the afternoons and evenings.

In addition to the three types of schools, *fourth*, there are now *Sekolah Islam* or Islamic schools and later there are also integrated Islamic schools (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*). These schools combine the national curriculum with a significant portion of Islamic subjects but position themselves under the jurisdiction of MoE. These schools are primarily funded by private organizations and community contributions and often receive additional support from religious organizations. *Sekolah Islam Terpadu* usually incorporates a more pronounced Islamic ideology and practices in their curriculum and programs, often inspired by the network of Jamaah Tarbiyah (Machmudi, 2008; Hasan, 2009; Hasan, 2012).

Formally, the three lower secondary schools under study fit the first three schools above, they are an SMP, an MTs, and a *pesantren* in the traditional sense. While the first two both adhere to the national curricula, they differ in terms of the number of religious subjects and local contents, time allocated for the additional subjects, and to a certain extent in how they are implemented. As there is now nationally a transition from the 2013 Curriculum to *Kurikulum Merdeka* (meaning curriculum with more freedom), the curriculum developed at the school level in SMP is called KOSP, standing for *Kurikulum Operasional Satuan*

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Pendidikan or operational curriculum for an education unit, while the one for MTs is called KOM, standing for *Kurikulum Operasional Madrasah* or operational curriculum for madrasa.

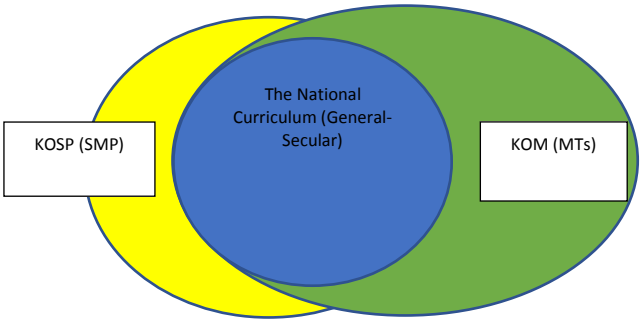

Figure 1 The National, SMP, and MTs and their Curricula

In the narratives shared by teachers from the three schools, seven key themes or dimensions emerged—ranging from conceptions of Islamic education to curriculum integration, adaptation to change, and community influences. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of how these themes manifest across the three school contexts, followed by a more detailed presentation of each.

Defining Islamic education at the schools

Across all three school contexts—SMP, MTs, and pesantren—teachers generally perceive Islamic education as involving not only formal religious instruction but also the cultivation of values, habits, and moral behavior. It is not confined to the subject matter but embedded in how students are formed as ethical, practicing Muslims. At the SMP level, one teacher framed Islamic education as a continuation of religious and moral formation begun at home, emphasizing the overlap between informal family education and formal school-based learning: "We were born [and grew up in] Muslim families… educated with certain values and norms as our parents understood them. We have been going to mosques since childhood. [In this way], religious values start to be cultivated."

At the MTs, multiple teachers described Islamic education as more holistic, encompassing Islamic values, practices, and character-building embedded in school routines. One teacher noted: "Islamic education is whatever is related to learning and teaching with Islamic values and nuances. For instance, there is a prayer [doa] before and after learning. There are habitual practices such as performing congregational prayers. Students pray before eating…." Another emphasized that since both teachers and students are Muslim, Islamic education permeates all activities that conform to religious teachings.

Table 1. Dimensions of Islamic educational practice

Dimension	SMP	MTs	Pesantren
Defining Islamic education	Continuation of home-based moral values; religion as an ethical frame	Holistic and routine-based; embedded in school life	Immersive faith practice; education as identity formation
Faith vs. inquiry	Inquiry allowed but ethically bounded; teacher-mediated	Faith-first approach; questioning limited by the doctrine	Faith-first approach; religiously framed critical thinking
Integration of knowledge	Varies by teacher; some ethical linkages, some separation	Formalized in some subjects (e.g., biology + fiqh); teacher-dependent	Unified under Islamic ethics; method-sensitive use of reasoning
Moral formation	Rituals (e.g., prayer, sermons) used to reinforce character	Adab through routine, modeling, and Islamic values	Lifestyle-based ethics via structured daily worship
Adaptation to change	Controlled tech use; P5 themes linked to Islam	Tech enhances learning; religiously framed change	Language programs, tech as "*mahmudah*"

Institutional vision	Religious nuances supplement secular core; [religious] branding appeals to parents	Vision of "Islamic generation"; balance of faith and modernity	Lived religious-led ethos; teachers as religious exemplars
Community influence	Religion adds value to secular schooling; aligns with parental expectations	Economic goal factors and ritual fatigue deter MTs for some	Affordability, responsiveness; religious + practical pathways

In the pesantren, Islamic education is understood through a traditional ethos that includes not only studying Islamic texts but practicing Islam in everyday routine. According to the Abuya (the religious leader managing the pesantren): "[The goal is that] no matter what they [the students] become or where they work, they remain devout Muslims who adhere to Islamic values." This philosophy informs the structure of the pesantren, where students who live in the boarding house engage in daily routines of congregational prayer, early rising, Quran recitation, and religious instruction.

Faith vs. Inquiry

In all three educational settings, the tension between faith and inquiry appears prominently in the narratives of teachers. However, how this tension is perceived and managed varies significantly across the institutional settings and individual teacher approaches. While no school formally discourages questioning, the extent to which critical thinking is fostered—especially when it may conflict with religious doctrine—is shaped by both institutional culture and teacher discretion. At the SMP level, some teachers acknowledged that encouraging students to express opinions and ask questions is part of their pedagogical approach. Yet they also noted that students often hesitate to speak, either due to shyness or fear of overstepping perceived boundaries. One Islamic education teacher emphasized that while critical questions are permitted—even when they touch on sensitive issues—they must be grounded in religious understanding: "To relate the contents from science with religious teachings, we have to consult the [religious] references… From the standpoint of religion [Islam], the [science] is one 'ikhtiar' [human endeavor] ... For better benefits, no problems."

Meanwhile, teachers from the MTs seemed to be more assertive in viewing faith as the guiding foundation of all learning. One MTs teacher argued that belief must override empirical evidence when it comes to core religious truths: "So, in Islamic teachings, if it is already related to faith, we don't anymore look at the evidence or how something might have happened, we just have to believe." Another teacher emphasized the sequencing of knowledge, arguing that religious understanding must precede secular knowledge: "When we strive for the hereafter, the worldly one will inevitably follow… It is useless if we have secular knowledge but our manners are not acceptable… [Religious leaders] become role models."

In the pesantren, Abuya's perspective offered a more nuanced engagement with inquiry, particularly within religious disciplines. He emphasized that critical thinking is embedded in Islamic scholarly tradition, especially in fields like hadith studies: "Pesantrens do encourage critical thinking… For instance, in hadith studies, the process of authentication involves both internal and external criticism… This approach is essentially scientific." However, he also acknowledged a current limitation: many students in pesantren tend to accept religious instruction uncritically, contrasting with earlier generations of Islamic scholars who were trained to rigorously question and analyze. Abuya's rejection of the secular-religious knowledge dichotomy is especially noteworthy. Drawing on Al-Ghazali, he reframed the issue as a moral classification of knowledge: "I never categorize knowledge as

secular… all knowledge is Islamic… Knowledge is either *mahmudah* [praiseworthy] or *mazmumah* [blameworthy]."

Integration of religious and secular subjects

Teachers discussed the integration of religious and secular knowledge, but their approaches and confidence levels in doing so varied considerably. While institutional encouragement exists in some cases (especially MTs and pesantren), the actual practice of integration depends heavily on teacher discretion, subject area, and perceived boundaries of religious appropriateness. At the SMP level, integration was approached pragmatically. One teacher clearly distinguished between secular and religious domains, suggesting that the primary aim of teaching a subject like biology should remain focused on scientific content: "While I am teaching biology, the matter learned should be biology. [I] opt to differentiate the secular from the religious." However, not all teachers shared this separationist stance. Another science teacher described a form of contextual integration, where science topics were connected to Islamic ethical teachings — such as preserving nature being framed as an Islamic responsibility: "Preserving nature is a part of religious teachings to 'honour' the nature… I myself use pesticide only in an emergency."

At the MTs, teachers appeared more formally encouraged to integrate religious content into their teaching. One science teacher explicitly described combining religious jurisprudence (fiqh) with biological instruction: "For example, in teaching reproduction, I connect it with fiqh in addition to its biological knowledge." An art teacher, in contrast, chose not to introduce religious content into his teaching, citing concern over making theological mistakes: "I limit myself… I'm afraid to make mistakes. I just slip in something like how we have to respect our parents, teachers, friends, and the environment… More of practical matters."

In the pesantren, integration of secular and religious knowledge was less emphasized in terms of direct subject blending, but more often philosophically justified. The Abuya articulated a worldview where all forms of knowledge—whether religious or scientific—are unified under Islamic purpose, as long as they are ethically sound: "It is not entirely accurate to say that all knowledge must be based on facts or empirical evidence…. If the students are learning prayers and recitation of the Quran, memorization is key. But if they're learning something analytical, then they use analytical methods."

Character building and moral development

Teachers consistently emphasized moral development and character building as central aims of Islamic education and that moral values are intentionally woven into non-religious moments. This theme emerged not only in relation to formal instruction but also through habitual practices, rituals, and role modeling, viewed by many as more effective in shaping students' behavior than abstract moral theory. At the SMP level, some teachers linked ritual practice directly with moral outcomes. One teacher, referring to the daily prayer routines, expressed the belief that consistent religious behavior translates into ethical conduct, suggesting a performative-moral connection: "I do prayers, how can [I] still steal?"

In MTs, similar views were expressed, but with a stronger emphasis on manners (*adab*) and modeling by adults. One teacher framed character development as both a religious and social obligation, particularly pointing to the example set by religious leaders: "It is useless if we have secular knowledge but our manners are not acceptable… [We can see] religious leaders become role models." Other MTs teachers noted that institutional routines support character development, such as prayer times, congregational activities, and recitations. A teacher described these practices as embedded into daily life rather than being

seen as add-ons: "There is a prayer [doa] before and after learning. There are habitual practices such as performing congregational prayers. Students pray before eating."

In the pesantren, the emphasis on ritual discipline and lifestyle as moral training is even more pronounced. Students — particularly those in residence — are expected to wake before dawn, pray in congregation, recite the Quran regularly, and follow a structured routine. According to the Abuya: "These practices are believed to cultivate habits that not only make students good Muslims but also good citizens."

Adaptation to change (technology and curriculum)

Teachers acknowledged that contemporary education must respond to societal and technological changes. However, the degree of adaptation—and the ways it is justified or constrained—varies. While there is no outright rejection of modern knowledge or tools, teachers often frame their use within ethical and religious boundaries, reinforcing that adaptation must not compromise Islamic values. At the SMP, teachers noted that students are increasingly tech-savvy and often arrive with access to a wide range of online information. One teacher observed that this information exposure presents both opportunities and challenges, especially when students bring unexpected or controversial topics into the classroom: "The children are at times 'more updated'." Teachers also mentioned that students had questioned issues like whether the Earth is flat or round, sparking classroom debates. In response to this information flux, the school allows limited and controlled use of smartphones: students may bring them, but devices are collected at the beginning of the school day. Some teachers, however, permit their use for educational purposes, depending on the context since "… learning isn't just about listening to teachers' lectures."

In MTs, teachers expressed similar sentiments. Some teachers use digital tutorials and online resources to support both religious and secular instruction. One teacher shared how technology had enhanced his own religious learning: "I used technology to learn about prayer through tutorials, for references and reading materials." Another teacher pointed out that technology is a tool, and whether it is beneficial depends on how it is used. This instrumental framing allows teachers to accept modern tools without compromising religious values. In terms of curriculum adaptation, MTs teachers are also responding to *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which allows for more flexibility and locally adapted content. Teachers are increasingly required to design project-based learning around broad themes, such as sustainability, diversity, and democracy (P5 program). These themes are often linked to religious principles to maintain coherence with Islamic identity.

In the pesantren, the philosophy of adaptation is explicitly articulated by the Abuya, who sees modern knowledge and technology as valuable when ethically framed. He draws again on Al-Ghazali's classification of knowledge, suggesting that technology is "*mahmudah*" (praiseworthy) knowledge when used to benefit society: "Honestly, our use of technology in learning, especially for junior high students, is still relatively limited. Technology is considered *mahmudah* knowledge." Beyond classroom tech, the pesantren also adapts structurally and institutionally: "Students are given the option to learn English and Mandarin alongside Arabic." The pesantren also engages in external collaborations, including programs that send students or alumni to work or study abroad, such as in Taiwan. However, "…while they [the students] learn secular knowledge and skills, they also must study and understand fundamental Islamic values."

Institutional vision and pedagogical ethos

In all three school types studied—SMP, MTs, and pesantren—the shared governance under a single Islamic educational foundation influences the schools' ethos, curriculum emphasis, and religious culture. Abuya, the owner of the Foundation, emphasized that his

foundational aim is not merely academic achievement but religious identity preservation: "No matter what they [the students] become or where they work, they remain devout Muslims who adhere to Islamic values." The concept of *kepesantrenan*—a term used to describe the traditional ethos of the *pesantren*—goes beyond curriculum content to include daily routines, behavioral expectations, and moral-social discipline. He also emphasized that while teachers may specialize in secular subjects, they are expected to engage continuously in religious development: "They must attend religious preaching and follow the guidelines set by the Foundation."

In the MTs, this influence is evident in how teachers articulate the school's vision. One teacher stated that their school aims to produce what she called an "Islamic generation," indicating a broader identity-shaping goal that extends beyond formal subjects. Teachers frequently referenced a 50:50 ideal balance between secular and religious content, reflecting both curriculum structure and an ideological stance. "…Muslims [should] believe that all knowledge originates from our religion, Islam." Another teacher articulated the belief that religious knowledge must come first, positioning secular content as secondary to ethical and spiritual development: "When we strive for the hereafter, the worldly one will inevitably follow…."

At the SMP, the institutional vision is more blended, reflecting its official categorization as a general-secular school. However, under the Foundation's management, the school introduces additional religious practices and symbols to create what one teacher described as an "Islamic nuance": "SMP is basically secular… Yet, in [our schools], we provide Islamic nuances. There are [learning] contents in forms of Islamic activities…." This infusion of Islamic elements—such as Friday pengajian sessions, Quran recitation (BPQ), and prayer rituals—is not required by national curriculum policy but is locally implemented, partly to distinguish the school in the eyes of parents: "…this policy becomes a selling point of the school in the eyes of the society…"

Parental preferences and community influence

While much of the teachers' focus centered on pedagogy and curriculum, several also reflected on the social and economic factors that influence parental decisions and student enrollment across school types. These narratives highlight the complex interplay between religious aspirations, economic pressures, and community expectations in shaping educational trajectories — especially in a diverse and dynamic setting like Indonesia. At the MTs, teachers were keenly aware that despite their region's overwhelmingly Muslim population, not all families prefer Islamic schools for their children. One teacher described how many parents choose general-secular schools (like SMP) over MTs or pesantren for practical and economic reasons: "In Cirebon regency [where the schools are situated], 99.9% are Muslims. Yet, [in terms of schooling, they] opt to study… not in Islamic schools." This teacher, who also manages a local pesantren, attributed this partly to financial pressure: "There is actually an economic factor. They want their children to enter the workforce so they can quickly help them [with the household economy]." Another factor influencing parental choice, according to some MTs teachers, is the perceived intensity of religious study, particularly the emphasis on memorization and recitation of Quran. Some students, they said, actively avoid enrolling in MTs or pesantren to avoid religious studies [which involve] more memorization and recitation.

At the pesantren, the Abuya acknowledged that the Foundation keeps tuition affordable, balancing ideological commitment with economic sensitivity. So, the pesantren is not only a spiritual institution but a community-anchored provider of accessible education. At the SMP, although fewer explicit comments were made about parental choice, the inclusion

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of additional Islamic content and rituals is itself partly framed as a response to community expectations. As noted earlier, the principal viewed the school's religious offerings as a "selling point", suggesting that community preferences for religious formation are a factor in how even secular schools position themselves: "…this policy becomes a selling point of the school in the eyes of the society…." This suggests that parental expectations — even in ostensibly secular settings — remain tied to Islamic values, and schools adapt accordingly to remain relevant.

Discussion

This study reaffirms the conceptual breadth of Islamic education, as theorized by Halstead (2004), Sahin (2018), and Zaman & Memon (2015), who highlight its holistic nature encompassing moral, ritual, and intellectual development. Across the three school types—SMP, MTs, and pesantren—teachers described Islamic education not simply as religious instruction but as a lived ethical orientation shaping daily habits, institutional routines, and personal identity. Yet, the findings suggest that the nature and depth of this education vary contextually. While SMP teachers tend to see Islamic education as an extension of family and social values, MTs teachers describe a more structured moral environment with ritual practices embedded in the school culture. At the pesantren, Islamic education becomes a fully immersive experience, forming not just knowledge but identity, aligning with Al-Attas' (1980) vision of education as the inculcation of adab. These differences reveal that Islamic education should be treated not as a static category but as a flexible, negotiated practice shaped by institutional vision and local context (Rayess, 2020).

The tension between faith and inquiry, widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Al-Attas, 1980; Rahman, 1982; Waghid, 2011; Sahin, 2013), also emerges clearly across school contexts—but not in fixed or binary terms. Teachers across all schools reflect varying approaches to managing this tension. At SMP, inquiry is generally encouraged but framed by religious appropriateness; questions are permitted so long as they are ethically guided and grounded in religious references. MTs teachers show more guarded openness, often placing religious truths beyond contestation, though some articulate a model of sequencing where faith guides and disciplines inquiry. In pesantren, critical thinking is nurtured within Islamic sciences, especially in textual analysis, but inquiry rarely extends beyond religious domains. These patterns support the notion of a continuum—from bounded, faith-framed inquiry to more open-ended questioning—shaped by epistemological commitments and institutional ethos (Sahin, 2018; Ucan, 2020; Zaman, 2021).

Efforts to integrate religious and secular knowledge also vary widely. While Islamic educational theory often calls for integration (Hamid, 2010; Memon & Abdalla, 2021), the findings show that actual practices range from teacher-driven ethical framing to formal curricular efforts and broader philosophical approaches. At SMP, integration is informal and often teacher-initiated—some link environmental themes to Islamic values, while others prefer to maintain disciplinary boundaries. MTs presents more structured integration, where secular topics like biology may be consciously infused with fiqh content. Yet even here, hesitancy persists, especially among teachers of non-religious subjects, reflecting concerns about accuracy or legitimacy. In the pesantren, integration operates at a deeper epistemological level, with all knowledge classified through a moral lens (*mahmudah vs. mazmumah),* aligning with classical frameworks such as Al-Ghazali's. Rather than fusing disciplines in content, pesantren pedagogy applies method-sensitive approaches, where memorization serves ritual subjects, and reasoning applies to analytic ones. Across all settings, integration remains a context-dependent endeavor, contingent on teacher confidence, institutional clarity, and perceived religious boundaries.

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Moral and character formation was emphasized by all teachers, consistent with Islamic educational aims articulated by Al-Attas (1980), Halstead (2004), and Sahin (2018). Across schools, Islamic education is not just about content but about forming ethical habits and disciplined behavior through ritual, routine, and modeling. At SMP, moral development is fostered through programs and ethical framing, often centered on prayer and communal activities. At MTs, such practices are more institutionalized and treated as daily expectations. At the pesantren, character formation is embedded in every aspect of life, from waking before dawn to Quran recitation and collective prayer. This immersive model illustrates a lifestyle pedagogy, where learning occurs through habituation and ethical exposure. Notably, even non-religious teachers, particularly in SMP and MTs, see themselves as moral agents—though they vary in how confidently they integrate Islamic values into their subjects. These findings affirm that character education in Islamic schools is layered, dynamic, and practiced through both overt instruction and implicit modeling (Ucan, 2020; Qureshi, 2021).

Finally, the study shows that adaptation to societal and technological change is not resisted but selectively embraced. Teachers across schools recognize the pressures of modernity—especially in relation to digital media, curricular reform, and economic realities—but engage these selectively through ethical filters. SMP teachers manage student exposure to online information with institutional controls, while MTs educators adopt technology to supplement religious instruction and align new national reforms (e.g., Kurikulum Merdeka) with Islamic values. The pesantren, while more reserved technologically, adapts structurally by offering multiple school tracks, foreign language training, and affordable tuition. Abuya's leadership plays a central role in shaping this ethos of ethical adaptation. These strategies align with what Sahin (2018) calls "faithful adaptability" and illustrate how Islamic education is evolving pragmatically without compromising its core religious mission.

Theoretically, taken together, this study invites a rethinking of Islamic education not as a uniform doctrinal framework but as a plural, negotiated field shaped by lived pedagogical encounters and institutional arrangements. It nuances the theory that tensions between faith and inquiry, or religious and secular knowledge, are static or oppositional; instead, the findings illustrate how these tensions are interpretively managed along flexible continua, informed by teacher agency, school ethos, and community negotiation. This reinforces recent calls in Islamic educational theory for more context-grounded, dialogical models that account for epistemological hybridity and institutional diversity. Practically, the study highlights the importance of positioning teachers as interpretive agents who, when supported through collaborative spaces and theological–pedagogical dialogue, are more empowered to ensure institutional flexibility and to integrate religious values with contemporary educational demands.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Islamic education in Indonesia's lower secondary schools—across SMP, MTs, and pesantren—is a dynamic and context-sensitive practice shaped by institutional ethos, teacher interpretations, and local socio-cultural realities. While all schools emphasize moral and character development as central to Islamic education, their approaches vary significantly. In SMP, Islamic values are incorporated through ethical framing and religious activities that complement the national curriculum. In MTs, the curriculum more explicitly blends religious and secular knowledge, though practices differ by subject and teacher confidence. In pesantren, Islamic education is fully immersive, embedding religious rituals, discipline, and identity into students' daily lives.

The tension between faith and inquiry, a central theme in Islamic educational theory, is not experienced as a binary but negotiated along a continuum. Teachers support questioning to varying degrees, with SMP allowing guided inquiry, MTs placing faith-based boundaries, and pesantren emphasizing critical thinking within Islamic sciences. Integration of religious and secular knowledge also ranges from ethical linkages to philosophical unification, depending on institutional vision and pedagogical approach. Despite challenges, all three school types show selective adaptation to technological, curricular, and societal changes—preserving Islamic values while engaging with contemporary demands. This confirms that Islamic education in Indonesia is an evolving project—shaped by the people, context, and purposes it serves.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, future research is recommended to explore students' perspectives on how they experience and interpret Islamic education models across different school types, particularly in relation to faith and inquiry. Additionally, for educational policymakers, professional development programs are needed to support teachers—especially those in non-religious subjects—in integrating religious and secular knowledge with confidence and pedagogical sensitivity as well as more spaces organizationally in which teachers are involved in continuous conversations curricularly and pedagogically. Further studies could expand to other regions and include modern or integrated Islamic schools to capture broader institutional adaptations. Evaluating the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in Islamic contexts, particularly its alignment with faith-based values through project-based learning, is also essential. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers should be encouraged to develop more contextualized and holistic learning. However, these efforts must consider existing challenges, including disparities in teacher competence, ambiguous institutional policies, parental preferences driven by economic factors, and limited technological integration in pesantren settings.

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