

Negotiation of Chinese Identity in Islamic Education in Public Schools: An Anthropological Study at SMPN 2 Pontianak

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Abstract

Amid the increasing complexity of cultural and religious diversity in public schools, maintaining the sustainability of inclusive Islamic values is becoming increasingly urgent. This study aims to examine how Islamic education in multiethnic schools can be a space for identity negotiation between Islam and Chineseness, especially for Chinese students at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City. This study uses an anthropological approach with qualitative methods, involving participatory observation and in-depth interviews with 9 informants, consisting of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, homeroom teachers, Chinese students, and parents. The results show that the practice of Islamic education in this school is carried out through a humanistic approach that is open to diversity, without emphasizing cultural uniformity. Interethnic interactions run harmoniously and contribute to the formation of tolerance values and cross-cultural understanding. Islamic education not only functions as a medium for fostering religiosity, but also strengthens inclusive citizenship identity. This study contributes to the development of a pedagogical model based on local wisdom and universal Islamic values in creating a moderate, fair, and adaptive learning space in a multicultural formal education environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society, Islamic education in public schools faces both challenges and opportunities in transforming religious values into a multicultural social space. Public schools, as formal educational institutions that are secular and open, represent the social diversity of society, including in terms of ethnicity and religion. In them, students from various backgrounds including Chinese Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim students interact in the same learning space. At this point, Islamic education plays a strategic role, not only as a means of transmitting Islamic teachings to Muslim students, but also as a medium for inter-identity meetings that have the potential to build cross-cultural understanding and increase the capacity for tolerance between students.

Previous studies have shown that when Islamic religious education is applied adaptively in public spaces such as public schools, it is able to form an open and dialogical religious identity, especially for Muslim students who live in pluralistic communities (Rosi & Yousif, 2024). In this context, the values of inclusivity, tolerance, and recognition of diversity are important foundations in building social harmony in the classroom. Public schools such as SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City, as a miniature of Indonesian society, clearly

demonstrate how social and cultural dynamics develop through intensive interactions between students from different backgrounds (Hosnan, 2022).

This study aims to understand in depth how Chinese students at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City experience, respond to, and negotiate their cultural and religious identities in the context of Islamic religious learning. The process of encountering Islamic values in religious classrooms becomes a complex social experience for Chinese students—both non-Muslims and Muslims—because they are involved in value encounters that are often normative but carried out in an inclusive social context. As stated by Ting-Toomey (2015), intercultural interaction spaces are crucial arenas in shaping identity awareness, as well as encouraging transformation of attitudes and understandings towards "the other".

On the other hand, the historical and social realities surrounding Chinese identity in Indonesia add complexity to the process of identity negotiation in educational spaces. Chinese identity is often in a socially and politically distanced position, due to the long legacy of marginalization and stereotyping that has been going on since the colonial period to the New Order era. In this context, the presence of Chinese students in Islamic education classrooms cannot be separated from the dynamics of representation and recognition of identity. When Islamic values are taught in a multi-ethnic space, there is a need to build a pedagogical approach that is not only tolerant, but also recognizes the existence of students' cultural identities equally and with dignity. The experience of Chinese students in participating in Islamic religious learning is a reflection of the extent to which educational institutions are able to create a safe space for the affirmation of minority cultural identities within the corridor of the religious values of the majority.

Furthermore, it is important to position Islamic education not only within a normative-theological framework, but also within a social praxis framework that is open to cultural dynamics. In this case, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have a central role as cultural actors who can bridge the values of Islamic teachings with the diverse social context of students. A dialogical and empathetic pedagogical approach allows for the establishment of egalitarian social relations, where Islamic values are understood as a moral force that supports humanity and social justice. Thus, contextual Islamic education has the potential to broaden students' religious horizons and encourage the formation of a civic identity based on inclusivity and multiculturalism.

From the perspective of educational anthropology, education is understood not only as a means of passing on knowledge, but also as a social field where the reproduction and transformation of cultural values occurs (Mahyudi, 2022). Therefore, in the context of multiethnic state schools, religious education does not merely function as a transmitter of normative doctrines, but also becomes a social arena where values, identities, and beliefs are dynamically negotiated. Islamic values presented in religious classes—if delivered contextually and reflectively can become a learning space that touches on the human dimension and encourages the formation of inclusive character.

However, studies that explicitly highlight Islamic education as an arena for identity negotiation in multicultural state schools are still relatively limited. In fact, an inclusive, adaptive, and contextual approach to Islamic education is urgently needed to respond to the challenges of diversity and prevent social fragmentation in formal education spaces. In this context, it is important to understand how a pedagogical approach that is sensitive to students' social and cultural realities can shape an open and cohesive citizenship identity (Al Musyarrofi & Rofiq, 2025).

Thus, the urgency of this research lies in the effort to examine Islamic education as a social practice that lives in the space of interaction between groups. Through an anthropological approach, this study seeks to deeply capture the cultural processes that occur in Islamic religious education classes, especially in the experiences of Chinese

students at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City, which is an important subject in discussions of identity, diversity, and social cohesion in the contemporary era.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a field study with an anthropological approach and qualitative methods. The research location is at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City, West Kalimantan. A public school that reflects ethnic and religious diversity. The informants consisted of 9 people: 2 Islamic Religious Education teachers, 3 homeroom teachers, 2 Chinese students (Christian and Buddhist), and 2 parents of students. Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, while data analysis was carried out thematically to reveal patterns of interaction, identity negotiation, and inclusive and humanistic learning practices. This approach is in line with the study of Bahri & Rizquha (2024) which shows that humanistic-based Islamic education is effective in forming a culture of tolerance in multi-ethnic schools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Results

The results of the observation show that Religious Education lessons at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City are implemented separately based on the religion of the students. Muslim students attend Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classes, while non-Muslim students, including Chinese students who are Christian and Buddhist, study their respective religions with appropriate religious teachers. This separation is in accordance with the national curriculum policy (National Education System Law Article 37 Paragraph 1 and Permendikbud No. 57–60 of 2014. (Nirwana and Khoiri 2023) Separation of religious studies based on religion is not a form of discrimination, but rather the implementation of students' rights according to the mandate of the constitution and education regulations, thus creating rigid social barriers between students.

Although there is separation in religious teaching, the social atmosphere in the school environment still reflects openness and inclusivity. Interactions between students of different religions and ethnicities take place naturally, both in general learning activities and non-curricular activities. Muslim and non-Muslim students appear to respect each other and show curiosity about each other's religious practices, without any domination or marginalization. This condition reflects the school's success in building a humanistic educational climate, where diversity is not seen as an obstacle, but as a wealth that enriches the learning process and character formation of students.

Based on the observation results, the number of students at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City in the 2024/2025 academic year was recorded at 754 students, consisting of 361 male students and 393 female students. They are divided into 24 study groups, which reflects a relatively balanced and structured class composition. This distribution of the number of students shows that SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City is a junior high school with a large capacity and a fairly diverse student population. This diversity is not only seen from the aspect of gender, but also from the religious and ethnic backgrounds of students, which makes this school a dynamic and potential social space for the implementation of inclusive and multicultural education. This condition is an important foundation in analyzing how interactions between students are formed, as well as how religious values, especially in Islamic education, can be internalized in the context of diversity.

Table 1. Students Based on Religion

(2024/2025 Academic Year – SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City)

Religion	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Islam	664	88,06%
Christian	45	5,97%
Catholic	31	4,11%
Buddhist	13	1,72%
Hindu	1	0,13%
Total	754	100%

Note: This data was obtained from the school's Dapodik database (code: 8355).

Table 1 shows the religious composition of students at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City, which is dominated by Muslim students, which is 88.06% of the total number of students of 754 people. Other religious groups include Christians (5.97%), Catholics (4.11%), Buddhists (1.72%), and Hindus (0.13%).

This religious diversity shows that although the school is in a predominantly Muslim community, there are also students from various religious backgrounds. This fact is important in anthropological studies and multicultural education, because it shows that state educational institutions such as SMPN 2 play a role as a social space where interactions across religious and cultural identities take place.

From the perspective of Islamic education, these data reinforce the urgency of implementing inclusive education, where teaching materials, learning approaches, and interactions between school members must be able to accommodate diversity of beliefs. In this context, religious education teachers (especially Islam) in public schools are required not only to convey material dogmatically, but also to instill values of tolerance, dialogue, and respect for differences.

These data can also be the basis for designing pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to the context of diversity, while also examining how religious identities, especially those of Chinese Muslim students, are negotiated in the majority public education space.

Data on the ethnic background of students' parents (fathers and mothers) were obtained through a Google Form-based questionnaire distributed to all students. Of the total 754 students, 340 students responded. The results of filling out the questionnaire showed that there was ethnic diversity that was quite representative of multicultural conditions in the school environment. This diversity reflects complex social dynamics, where cross-ethnic interactions are part of students' daily lives. This condition provides an important context in examining the practice of inclusive Islamic education that is adaptive to pluralistic social realities.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Fathers and Mothers' Ethnic Groups

No.	Tribe	Father (n = 340)	Mother (n = 340)
1	Javanese	148 students (43,5%)	115 students (33,8%)
2	Malay	97 students (28,5%)	134 students (39,4%)
3	Chinese	34 students (10,0%)	32 students (9,4%)
4	Dayak	17 students (5,0%)	24 students (7,0%)
5	Bugis	14 students (4,0%)	17 students (5,0%)
6	Batak	12 students (3,5%)	10 students (3,0%)

No.	Tribe	Father (n = 340)	Mother (n = 340)
7	Madurese	10 students (2,9%)	7 students (2,0%)

Data source: Results of filling out Google Form by students (n = 340 of a total of 754 students)

Table 2 presents ethnographic data on the ethnic origins of parents of students studying at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City. Of the total respondents of 340 students, the majority came from two main ethnic groups, namely Javanese and Malay, with a fairly significant percentage. The majority of students' fathers were from the Javanese ethnic group (43.5%), while the majority of students' mothers were from the Malay ethnic group (39.4%).

The presence of students from ethnic Chinese (10%), Dayak (5–7%), and several other ethnic groups such as Bugis, Batak, and Madurese, shows that this school is a multiethnic and multicultural environment. This diversity is an important context in viewing educational practices, including Islamic religious education, which is presented in an inclusive and heterogeneous public space.

This diversity is an important context in understanding how educational practices, especially Islamic religious education, are implemented in a heterogeneous public space. In a situation like this, religious education not only functions as a means of transferring religious values, but also as a medium for forming inclusive attitudes, cross-cultural dialogue, and respect for differences. This understanding was strengthened through interviews with several Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at the school.

Based on an interview with the Islamic Religious Education Teacher (G1), he stated in the interview:

"Although religious lessons are separated, we still teach universal values such as honesty, responsibility, and tolerance that can be understood by all students. Their interactions are not limited to religious classes, but also in daily school activities."

A religious education teacher (G2) said:

"We don't want children to grow up exclusively. We emphasize that Islamic values are in line with humanitarian values and local culture".

Although there is a formal separation in religious lessons based on students' beliefs, this does not hinder the creation of an inclusive and interactive school atmosphere across identities.

Based on interviews with non-Muslim Chinese students, they stated that they did not experience discrimination even though they did not attend Islamic Religious Education classes.

A Chinese Buddhist student (S1) said:

"I attend Buddhist religious lessons alone, but I often chat and discuss with Muslim friends. We tell each other about our respective religions. No one badmouths each other."

A Chinese Buddhist student (S2) said:

"I study Christianity in my own room. But I also know a little about Islam from my friends. We often talk and discuss differences."

A Chinese Buddhist student (S3) said:

"I do not attend Islamic Religious Education classes, but I do not feel excluded. All the teachers and friends treat me well."

This shows that identity negotiation and exchange of religious understanding occur informally, especially through interactions between students outside of the religious education classroom. This reflects the existence of an inclusive culture that lives in the daily life of the school, not only in the formal structure of learning.

Based on the results of interviews with parents of Chinese students (O1) stated:

"We are not worried about children studying in public schools. In fact, we are happy because this school is open and children are taught to respect differences from an early age."

Parents of Chinese students (O2) stated:

"My child can still study according to his religion. But he also learns to respect other religions from interactions at school."

This indicates that Islamic education in public schools can run side by side with religious diversity, as long as its values are translated contextually and inclusively.

Based on the results of the interview with the homeroom teacher (W1) confirmed that the religion class was divided according to the students' religion, but assignments and interactions remained interfaith:

"Yes, they study their respective religions. But in group assignments, class discussions, and school activities, everyone joins. There is no exclusivity."

Another homeroom teacher (W2) highlighted the importance of a fair approach in treating all students:

"We do not discriminate. Both Muslim and non-Muslim students, including Chinese, are treated the same. Their interactions outside the classroom actually complement each other."

Although religion lessons are carried out separately based on each student's beliefs, the practice of school life outside the classroom still reflects the values of inclusivity and togetherness.

3.2. Discussion

The research findings at SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City show that the implementation of Islamic religious education takes place in a multi-ethnic and multicultural social context. Structurally, religious lessons at this school are carried out separately according to each student's religion, as regulated in the National Education System Law Article 37 Paragraph 1 and Permendikbud No. 57–60 of 2014. However, daily practices at school show that this administrative separation does not necessarily create social segregation. Interactions between students across religions and ethnicities take place openly, dynamically, and collaboratively, creating an inclusive learning atmosphere.

The school's demographic data reinforces this context: the majority of students are Muslim (88.06%), with minority groups of Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, and Hindus as part of the student community. In terms of ethnicity, the dominance of Javanese and Malay ethnicities is side by side with the presence of Chinese (10%), Dayak (5–7%), and other groups such as Bugis, Batak, and Madurese. This configuration makes SMP Negeri 2 a miniature representation of Indonesian pluralism that enables the study of religious education in a complex and pluralistic social space.

Qualitative findings show that although religious education classes are separated based on religion, the Islamic values conveyed in Islamic Religious Education lessons are inclusive and transideological. Islamic Religious Education teachers consistently emphasize universal values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, and compassion that can be accepted and appreciated by all students, without imposing theological dogma. Thus, Islamic education in this context is not only a doctrinal tool, but also acts as a medium for character formation across identities. This is in line with the view of Bahri and Rizquha (2024) who stated that inclusive education must ensure that all students regardless of cultural and religious background feel accepted, appreciated, and actively involved in the learning process.

Interviews with non-Muslim Chinese students showed that they felt socially accepted, did not experience discrimination, and were active in interfaith interactions. In fact, they often share religious perspectives and experiences in informal conversations, both in learning activities and other school activities. This process reflects that the formation of religious identity in schools does not only occur formally through the curriculum, but also through the negotiation of values and meanings that take place in students' daily practices.

Furthermore, interviews with parents of Chinese students confirmed the school's open climate. They considered that even though their children did not attend Islamic Religious Education lessons, they still gained an understanding of the importance of respecting other religions through social interactions at school. This shows that Islamic values can function as a cultural and spiritual bridge, as long as they are delivered in a contextual, humanistic, and non-exclusive framework. Teachers in this case become important actors in conveying Islamic teachings in a reflective and empathetic manner.

Interfaith interactions are also seen in non-curricular activities, such as group discussions, cross-subject projects, the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), national holiday commemorations, and activities based on national values. These activities create a social space where students from different religious and cultural backgrounds work together, build mutual trust, and develop cross-identity understanding. Munib (2018) stated that these types of activities contribute significantly to forming social cohesion and fostering inclusive attitudes among students.

The phenomenon of informal interactions between Chinese students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, shows that there is a natural and unforced exchange of values. The dialogue that emerges outside of religious classes shows that cultural and religious identities can be negotiated harmoniously, without eliminating cultural roots or causing alienation. This process is consistent with the principles of multicultural Islamic education based on the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, namely respect for diversity, elimination of prejudice, and the formation of democratic, humanist, and pluralist citizenship identities (Nugroho, 2016).

From the perspective of educational anthropology, as stated by Mahyudi (2022), education is seen as a cultural practice that not only transmits knowledge, but also becomes an arena where values, identities, and social relations are negotiated. Islamic religious education in the context of pluralistic state schools, thus, does not only aim to shape the religiosity of Muslim students, but also to build a shared awareness of the importance of peaceful coexistence in differences. The model of implementing Islamic education as found in SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City shows that religion can be taught adaptively to the social and cultural realities of students. Rather than being a source of exclusivity, Islamic education appears as a social instrument to shape empathetic character, inclusive citizenship ethics, and identity resilience in diversity. These findings have important implications for the development of religious education curriculum and pedagogy in state schools, especially in the context of a pluralistic society.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the implementation of Islamic religious education in multiethnic public schools such as SMP Negeri 2 Pontianak City not only functions as an instrument for transmitting religious values, but also as a space for negotiating cultural and religious identities in a pluralistic social context. Although religious lessons are carried out separately based on each student's religious affiliation, daily practices at school show the

creation of inclusive, dialogical, and open social interactions between students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The Islamic values taught in Islamic Religious Education lessons are transideological and universal, such as honesty, justice, responsibility, and compassion which are able to bridge differences in beliefs and strengthen social cohesion. Islamic Religious Education teachers play a strategic role as cultural agents who present Islamic education in a humanistic, contextual, and reflective framework towards students' social realities. Interactions across identities, both inside and outside the classroom, show that Chinese students both Muslim and non-Muslim can experience the process of learning Islamic religion as an inclusive experience and enrich their identities.

These findings confirm that an Islamic educational approach based on the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and implemented inclusively is able to create a safe and equal social space for students from ethnic and religious minority groups. Religious education in this context not only forms personal religiosity, but also develops a democratic and empathetic citizenship identity. Conceptually, this practice reflects the anthropology of education approach that views education as a field of social interaction where values, identities, and relationships are continuously negotiated. Therefore, the Islamic education model such as in SMP Negeri 2 provides an important contribution to the development of a religious pedagogy paradigm that is relevant to the reality of Indonesia's diversity. Islamic education can and should be an instrument for strengthening social cohesion, building inclusive character, and forming tolerant citizens who are ready to live in diversity.

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