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## INTEGRATING MULTICULTURAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION WITH A LOVE-BASED CURRICULUM AND DEEP LEARNING: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Student Character and Empathy in Indonesian Madrasahs

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### Abstract

This study aims to develop and examine a holistic framework integrating multicultural Islamic education, a love-based curriculum, and deep learning to enhance students' character and empathy in Indonesian madrasahs. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, quantitative data were collected through pre-test and post-test surveys, while qualitative data were obtained via classroom observations and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal a significant improvement in students' empathy and character, supported by statistical analysis ( $p < 0.001$ ). The integration of compassionate values within a multicultural and reflective learning environment fosters meaningful learning experiences and strengthens social awareness. Furthermore, the study identifies a novel integrative model that combines cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in a unified pedagogical approach. This model contributes both theoretically, by enriching the discourse on Islamic education, and practically, by offering an adaptable framework for curriculum development in madrasahs. The study highlights the urgency of transforming traditional instructional approaches into more humanistic, inclusive, and contextually relevant practices.

**Keywords:** Multicultural Islamic Education, Love-Based Curriculum, Deep Learning, Student Character, Empathy

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengembangkan dan menguji kerangka holistik yang mengintegrasikan pendidikan Islam multikultural, kurikulum berbasis kasih sayang, dan pendekatan deep learning dalam meningkatkan karakter dan empati siswa madrasah di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain mixed methods dengan pendekatan sequential explanatory, di mana data kuantitatif diperoleh melalui survei pre-test dan post-test, sedangkan data kualitatif dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara mendalam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan signifikan pada empati dan karakter siswa, yang didukung oleh analisis statistik ( $p < 0,001$ ). Integrasi nilai kasih sayang dalam lingkungan pembelajaran multikultural dan reflektif mampu menciptakan pengalaman belajar yang bermakna serta memperkuat kesadaran sosial siswa. Selain itu, penelitian ini menghasilkan model integratif baru yang menggabungkan dimensi kognitif, afektif, dan sosial dalam satu pendekatan pedagogis terpadu. Model ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dan praktis bagi pengembangan kurikulum madrasah yang lebih humanis, inklusif, dan kontekstual.*

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan Islam Multikultural, Kurikulum Berbasis Kasih Sayang, Deep Learning, Karakter Siswa, Empati

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### Introduction

Madrasah education in Indonesia faces complex challenges regarding the development of

students' character and empathy amidst an increasingly dynamic social, cultural and religious diversity. Conventional approaches to Islamic education often still focus on cognitive and normative aspects, thereby failing to adequately accommodate the affective and social dimensions of learners. Yet, multicultural education is an urgent necessity in a pluralistic society such as Indonesia (Banks, 1994). The integration of the value of compassion into the curriculum is also considered vital for strengthening harmonious social relations (Arif et al., 2024; Zuhri et al., 2026). Therefore, a holistic approach is required that can address these challenges comprehensively and contextually.

Recent studies indicate that multicultural-based Islamic education can enhance students' tolerance and inclusive attitudes; however, its implementation remains partial and has not yet been systematically integrated into the curriculum (Hosnan, 2022; Mustamir & Tang, 2025). On the other hand, the concept of a love-based curriculum, which emphasises empathy, compassion, and human relationships, has not yet been widely adopted within the madrasah context. Research on deep learning in education is also developing rapidly, particularly in fostering deep and reflective understanding (Fithriyah et al., 2025; Napitupulu et al., 2025). However, the integration of these three approaches has rarely been studied comprehensively within the context of Islamic education in Indonesia.

A research gap is evident in the scarcity of studies that combine multicultural Islamic education, a love-based curriculum, and the deep learning approach within a single, coherent conceptual framework. Most research still treats these three aspects separately, thus failing to produce a truly holistic learning model (Khasanah, 2023; Mo'tasim et al., 2025). Furthermore, empirical research on the impact of integrating the value of compassion into religious education on the development of students' empathy remains limited. This highlights the need for the development of a new model capable of simultaneously integrating cognitive, affective, and social dimensions within madrasah education.

Theoretically, multicultural education in Islam is rooted in the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which emphasises universal compassion and social justice (Fajri, 2024). However, translating this value into pedagogical practice still faces conceptual and methodological challenges. Meanwhile, the theory of care ethics developed by Crowley emphasises the importance of empathetic relationships in the educational process (Crowley, 1994). Integration with deep learning, which focuses on meaningful and reflective learning (Long et al., 2025; Zhou & Zhang, 2025), has the potential to create a more profound learning experience. However, the synergy between these three approaches has not yet been systematically explored within the context of Indonesian madrasahs.

From a practical perspective, madrasahs, as religious-based educational institutions, have great potential to develop students' character holistically. However, the existing curriculum still tends to be oriented towards academic achievement and rote learning, thus failing to sufficiently encourage the development of empathy and social concern (Haris & Sayyi, 2026; Takunas et al., 2024). Research indicates that experience-based and reflective learning can enhance students' social awareness (Kolb, 1984). Therefore, curriculum innovation is required that can integrate values of compassion and a deep learning approach so that students not only understand religious teachings but also internalise them in their daily lives.

Based on this background, the research question is: how can multicultural Islamic education be integrated with a compassion-based curriculum and a deep learning approach within an effective holistic framework? The aim of this research is to develop a conceptual model capable of significantly enhancing the character and empathy of madrasah students (Wardi et al., 2023). The novelty of this research lies in the integration of three approaches which have previously been studied separately into a single unified framework. It is hoped that this research will not only enrich the body of Islamic educational theory but also provide practical solutions for the development of madrasah curricula in Indonesia.

By combining the dimensions of multiculturalism, compassion, and deep learning, this study

offers a new approach that is more relevant to the educational needs of the 21st century. The proposed holistic framework is expected to bridge the gap between normative values and pedagogical practices in madrasahs. Furthermore, this study also seeks to provide an empirical basis for the development of more inclusive and humanistic educational policies. Thus, the urgency of this research lies not only in its academic contribution but also in its impact on the formation of a generation that is principled, empathetic, and capable of living harmoniously amidst diversity.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design to systematically integrate quantitative and qualitative data. The initial phase involved a survey using a structured questionnaire to measure the levels of empathy and character among madrasah students before and after the curriculum intervention. The instrument was developed based on empathy and character indicators from validated literature. Subsequently, the qualitative phase was carried out through in-depth interviews and classroom observations to understand the learning experiences of students and teachers. This approach was chosen as it provides a comprehensive understanding of educational phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, involving students and teachers from several madrasahs representing both urban and rural contexts. Selection criteria included the institutions' readiness to implement a compassion-based curriculum and a deep learning approach.

The intervention was carried out through the development of learning modules integrating multicultural values, empathy, and critical reflection over the course of one semester. Teachers were provided with initial training regarding the implementation of the curriculum. This technique is relevant for contextual educational research that emphasises data depth over broad generalisation (Boyle, 2004; Camic, 2003). Data collection was carried out using several instruments, namely a Likert scale questionnaire, an observation sheet, and a semi-structured interview guide. The validity of the instruments was tested through expert judgement and pilot testing, whilst reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Quantitative data were analysed using statistical tests such as the paired-sample t-test to examine changes before and after the intervention. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding techniques to identify patterns and the meaning of participants' experiences. This combination of analyses allows for data triangulation, which enhances the credibility of the research findings (Miles et al., 2013).

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed source, method, and temporal triangulation. Additionally, member checking was conducted by involving respondents in verifying preliminary findings. The researcher also upheld research ethics by obtaining consent from the madrasah and ensuring the confidentiality of participants' data. The entire research process was systematically documented to maintain transparency and an audit trail. This approach is crucial in educational research to ensure the validity and integrity of the results produced and to enhance confidence in the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **The Significance of Multicultural Islamic Education Integration for Character Formation**

The integration of multicultural education within the Islamic education framework has demonstrated a significant empirical impact on student character, specifically in enhancing tolerance and inclusivity. This finding aligns with Banks' foundational theory, which posits that recognizing diversity is essential for effective social learning (Banks, 1994). The quantitative data from this study corroborates this theoretical stance, showing a notable increase in character scores from 3.34 to 4.05 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This improvement is not merely statistical; it represents a pedagogical success in contextualizing Islamic teachings within Indonesia's pluralistic society, thereby addressing the

concurrent demands for religious instruction and multicultural competence.

Empirically, the observed character development transcends cognitive understanding, manifesting as a genuine internalization of values in student behavior. This supports Gay's assertion that culturally responsive, value-based education yields greater efficacy than normative, dogmatic approaches (Gay, 2010). The qualitative data from this study enriches this finding, with classroom observations revealing that students actively demonstrated mutual respect and engaged in inclusive interactions post-intervention. Consequently, this evidence suggests that Islamic education possesses inherent flexibility, capable of accommodating universal multicultural values without compromising its theological identity, thereby fostering a more robust ethical-social framework for students.

However, a critical analysis of the implementation process reveals persistent structural and pedagogical challenges that can hinder the systematic integration of multicultural values in *madrasahs*. Tilaar notes that many educators lack the necessary pedagogical competencies for such integration (Tilaar, 2012). This study's findings confirm that these challenges were effectively mitigated through targeted teacher training and the development of specialized learning modules (Fithriyah, 2023; Ismail, Takwil, et al., 2025). The significant post-intervention improvements, as reflected in both quantitative scores and qualitative observations of teacher-student interactions, underscore that institutional support and systematic capacity building are not merely beneficial but are critical prerequisites for successful curriculum reform.

From a theological perspective, the Islamic concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation) provides a robust and indigenous foundation for multicultural education. Al-Qaradawi argues that this principle of universal compassion inherently supports the development of inclusive and just character (Qaradawi, 2010). This study provides empirical validation for this theoretical argument, demonstrating that the integration of this Islamic value with modern multicultural principles is not only conceptually compatible but also practically effective. The significant post-intervention improvements in student empathy and character demonstrate that Islamic values can be operationalized to enhance social cohesion in a diverse educational setting.

Furthermore, the significant increase in student empathy scores, rising from 3.21 to 4.12 ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicates that the intervention's impact extends beyond external behavior to deeply affect students' affective development. This aligns with Hoffman's theory that empathy is cultivated through reflective and contextual social experiences (Hoffman, 2001). The qualitative data from student interviews supports this, as students reported feeling more connected to the material and better able to understand the perspectives of others. Thus, the integration effectively bridges the historical gap between cognitive knowledge acquisition and the practical application of social ethics in Islamic education.

In conclusion, the findings from this study robustly affirm that the systematic integration of multicultural education within the *madrasah* curriculum is a highly effective strategy for cultivating student character capable of navigating diversity. This integrated approach is validated by significant quantitative improvements in tolerance and social care, as well as qualitative evidence of enhanced classroom interactions. Its theoretical relevance, grounded in both Islamic theology and modern pedagogical theory, is matched by its practical applicability within the complex and dynamic educational landscape of Indonesia (Najmi & Ismail, 2025).

The results of this study indicate that integrating multicultural Islamic education with a love-based curriculum and a deep learning approach has a significant impact on enhancing students' character and empathy in Indonesian *madrasahs*. Quantitative analysis using a paired sample t-test revealed a notable increase in the average empathy score from 3.21 to 4.12 (on a 1–5 scale), with a significance level of  $p < 0.001$ . Similarly, character scores encompassing tolerance, social awareness, and inclusivity improved from 3.34 to 4.05. These findings demonstrate that the implemented curricular intervention effectively addresses the research problem related to improving students'

affective dimensions.

**Table 1. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores**

Variable	Pre-test (Mean)	Post-test (Mean)	$\Delta$ Increase	Sig. (p)
Empathy	3.21	4.12	+0.91	<0.001
Character	3.34	4.05	+0.71	<0.001

These data suggest that the holistic approach significantly enhances the internalization of values among students. The most substantial improvement was observed in affective empathy, particularly in students' ability to understand others' feelings and demonstrate care in social interactions.

### **The Role of a Love-Based Curriculum in Fostering Student Empathy**

The implementation of a love-based curriculum has been empirically validated as a crucial element in significantly enhancing student empathy. This approach centers humane relationships within the learning process, a principle foundational to Noddings' ethics of care (Noddings, 2013). The quantitative evidence from this study is compelling, with empathy scores showing a substantial increase from 3.21 to 4.12 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This statistically significant finding confirms that a pedagogy emphasizing care and compassion can effectively strengthen the affective dimension of learning, an area often neglected in traditional, cognitively-focused educational systems (Afandi & Sayyi, 2023).

Qualitative interview data reveals that this pedagogical approach fostered a deeper emotional connection between students and the learning material. This experience aligns with Bruner's constructivist theory (Bruner, 1966), which posits that learning is most effective when it is relevant and personally meaningful to the learner. Students in this study reported that the curriculum helped them understand Islamic teachings not merely as abstract norms but as practical, lived experiences emphasizing empathy and social justice, thereby transforming their learning into a more profound and internalized process.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the critical role of the teacher in the success of this curriculum is undeniable. Ampofo et al., emphasizes that educators who demonstrate empathy and cultivate positive student-teacher relationships are more effective in instilling values (Ampofo et al., 2025). This study's findings corroborate this, with teacher interviews indicating that the love-based modules encouraged more humanistic interactions. The positive outcomes, as evidenced by improved student empathy, highlight that effective curriculum transformation is intrinsically linked to continuous teacher professional development and support in adopting new relational pedagogies.

A critical challenge identified in this study is maintaining the consistent application of love-based values within a school environment often dominated by a focus on cognitive academic achievement. The OECD has critiqued educational systems for evaluation models that frequently neglect affective learning outcomes (OECD, 2019). This study proposes a solution to this systemic issue by demonstrating that integrating empathy indicators into student assessment is feasible and effective (Ismail, Maulidi, et al., 2025; Sa'edi et al., 2025). This approach ensures that the development of care and compassion is valued alongside academic success, creating a more balanced educational ecosystem.

Conceptually, the love-based curriculum offers a significant contribution to Islamic education by foregrounding its relational and humanistic dimensions. This approach complements traditional Islamic pedagogy, which Mashuri et al., notes has historically focused more on normative and ritualistic aspects (Mashuri et al., 2024; miskawi & Djono, 2025). By integrating an ethics of care, this study provides a model for reconstructing Islamic education to be more contextually relevant and holistically humanistic, demonstrating that empathy and compassion are not external additions but are central to Islamic teachings and practice.

Ultimately, the findings confirm that a love-based curriculum is not only effective in enhancing empathy but is also instrumental in creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. The combination of significant quantitative empathy gains and qualitative reports of improved interpersonal interactions demonstrates its holistic impact. This approach fosters student development in a more integrated manner, proving that curricula centered on human connection are vital for cultivating emotionally intelligent and socially responsible individuals.

### **The Contribution of Deep Learning to Reflective and Meaningful Pedagogy**

The deep learning approach employed in this study has been proven to significantly enhance students' reflective capacities and promote deep understanding. In contrast to surface learning, Dolmans et al., and Skorbakk & Gamlem foundational work describes deep learning as the process of relating new ideas to prior knowledge and real-world contexts (Dolmans et al., 2016; Skorbakk & Gamlem, 2025). The results of this study demonstrate that students successfully applied this approach, moving beyond rote memorization to connect Islamic teachings with contemporary social issues, a transformation qualitatively observed in their critical reflections during class discussions.

The improvement in students' reflective abilities was evident through both observation and interview data, where they displayed enhanced critical thinking regarding issues of diversity and social justice. This aligns with Sayyi et al.'s assertion that deep learning is essential for developing 21st-century competencies (Sayyi, Mashuri, et al., 2025). In this context, the *madrasah* is shown to be a strategic environment for cultivating students who are not only religiously grounded but also possess the critical and adaptive skills necessary for active citizenship in a complex, pluralistic society.

The deep learning framework was operationalized through strategies centered on reflection and collaborative discussion, which effectively increased student engagement. This methodological choice is supported by Kolb's experiential learning theory, which posits that concrete experience and reflective observation are essential for meaningful learning (Kolb, 2015). The success of this approach, as evidenced by the increase in both empathy and character scores, confirms its strong theoretical basis and its practical viability as a method for deepening cognitive and affective engagement in the Islamic education classroom.

A critical finding is that the successful implementation of deep learning necessitates a fundamental shift in pedagogical practice. Sayyi, et al., emphasizes the importance of teachers transitioning from being mere disseminators of information to becoming active facilitators of learning (Sayyi, Asmuki, et al., 2025). This study's data confirms that this paradigm shift is achievable but requires sustained professional development and mentoring. Teachers who underwent training were able to effectively facilitate the reflective discussions that are central to deep learning, demonstrating that pedagogical transformation is a key enabler of curriculum innovation (Avif et al., 2026).

The integration of deep learning principles with Islamic values adds a new and important dimension to religious pedagogy. As S.h et al., suggests, such an integration allows students to move beyond textual comprehension to a deeper understanding of meaning and relevance in daily life (Rahmawati & Fithriyah, 2026; S.h et al., 2024). This study's findings illustrate that by employing deep learning, students could critically analyze and apply Islamic principles to their own experiences, thereby enriching their religious understanding and making it a more dynamic and personally significant part of their identity.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that deep learning contributes significantly to the creation of a reflective, critical, and meaningful learning environment. This pedagogical approach was essential in strengthening the overall outcomes of the integrated curriculum. By fostering deeper cognitive engagement and critical reflection, deep learning provides the necessary methodological framework that amplifies the impacts of both multicultural education and the love-based curriculum, leading to the holistic development of the student.

Classroom observations further revealed behavioral changes during the learning process. Students became more actively engaged in reflective discussions, demonstrated mutual respect, and were able to connect religious content with diverse social realities. Teachers also reported that the love-based modules fostered more humane and empathetic interactions between teachers and students. A summary of observational findings is presented below:

**Table 2. Observed Changes in Student Behavior**

Observed Aspect	Before Intervention	After Intervention
Discussion participation	Low	High
Tolerance attitude	Moderate	High
Critical reflection	Limited	Developed
Interpersonal empathy	Low	High

Qualitative analysis from interviews indicated that students perceived the learning process as more meaningful and relevant to their daily lives. They expressed that the love-based approach enabled them to understand Islamic teachings not merely as normative doctrines, but as lived practices emphasizing empathy and social justice. Teachers also noted that the deep learning approach encouraged more critical and reflective thinking, particularly in addressing issues of diversity.

The interpretation of these findings confirms that the integration of multicultural education, a love-based curriculum, and deep learning successfully creates a learning experience that is not only cognitive but also affectively and socially transformative. Therefore, the research hypothesis that this holistic approach can enhance students' character and empathy is empirically supported. These results underscore that curriculum innovation grounded in compassion and deep learning offers an effective solution for strengthening character education in Indonesian *madrasahs*.

### **The Novelty of a Holistic Integrative Model**

The primary contribution of this research is the development and empirical validation of a holistic integrative model that systematically combines multicultural Islamic education, a love-based curriculum, and deep learning. While scholars like Banks, Noddings, and de La Hoz-Ruiz et al., have individually explored these domains, the literature has lacked a unified framework (Banks, 1994; de La Hoz-Ruiz et al., 2024; Noddings, 2013). This study addresses this gap by demonstrating that the synergistic integration of these three approaches proven by the significant simultaneous increases in character and empathy scores yields an impact greater than the sum of its parts.

The developed model is architecturally structured with the love-based curriculum as its core, providing the affective and ethical foundation. This core is contextualized within multicultural education, which defines the social and cultural landscape, and is operationalized through deep learning, which provides the pedagogical methodology. This tripartite structure ensures a systematic integration of values and practice, which Miller identifies as a hallmark of holistic education (Miller, 2007). This structure allows for the simultaneous development of cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in students (Nofi & Fithriyah, 2025; Pluim et al., 2020).

A significant advantage of this model is its inherent flexibility and adaptability to the diverse contexts of *madrasahs* across Indonesia. Recognizing the country's high degree of cultural and social diversity, the model is designed not as a rigid prescription but as a responsive framework that can be tailored to local needs. As Tilaar emphasizes, educational solutions in Indonesia must be context-sensitive (Tilaar, 2012). This model's adaptive capacity, evidenced by its successful implementation in diverse classroom settings, enhances its practical relevance and potential for broader application.

Furthermore, this model offers a more comprehensive evaluation framework by integrating indicators of empathy and character into the assessment process. This directly addresses the

widespread criticism, noted by the OECD, that educational evaluation is overly focused on cognitive outcomes (OECD, 2019). By demonstrating that empathy and character can be effectively measured and significantly improved, this model provides a concrete, solution-oriented approach to reforming assessment practices in Islamic education, making it both an innovative and a practical contribution to the field.

Theoretically, this model enriches the discourse of Islamic education by harmoniously integrating contemporary Western pedagogical concepts with foundational Islamic values. This synthesis demonstrates that a productive dialogue between tradition and modernity can yield significant educational innovation, as Rofiqi et al., suggests is necessary for the field's evolution (Rofiqi et al., 2023; Sahrowi et al., 2025). The success of this integrated model not only provides a new framework for practice but also opens avenues for future research exploring how similar integrations can be developed for other dimensions of Islamic education.

In conclusion, the holistic integrative model developed and validated in this study represents the principal novelty of this research. Its significance lies not only in its theoretical innovation combining multicultural, affective, and deep learning paradigms but also in its proven practical efficacy. By offering a scientifically validated solution for enhancing character and empathy in *madrasah* settings, this model contributes to the development of an educational system that is more humane, inclusive, and transformative, providing a robust foundation for future pedagogical development.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this study confirms that the integration of multicultural Islamic education, a love-based curriculum, and a deep learning approach within a holistic framework is proven to be effective in significantly enhancing students' character and empathy in *madrasahs*. This approach not only addresses contemporary educational challenges that demand a balance between cognitive, affective, and social dimensions, but also fills the research gap where these three approaches have previously been examined separately. The findings indicate that value internalization becomes more profound when learning is designed to be reflective, contextual, and relational. Furthermore, the developed model contributes theoretically by enriching a more humanistic and inclusive paradigm of Islamic education, while also offering practical contributions through an adaptive and applicable curriculum implementation in *madrasahs*. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of curriculum innovation grounded in compassion and deep learning as a transformative strategy for Islamic education in Indonesia, aiming to cultivate a generation with strong character, high empathy, and the ability to live harmoniously within a diverse society.

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