



# Inclusivity Concern in The Private Islamic Schools

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**Abstract.** This article discusses the issue of inclusiveness in private Islamic schools, specifically in Surabaya. By conducting observations in various Islamic schools, this article aims to reveal the potential of inclusiveness within Islamic private schools in Surabaya. There is a presumption that teachers in these schools tend to acknowledge a singular truth without presenting different kinds of beliefs. They typically adhere to the traditional interpretation of Islam, which clearly defines boundaries between religious communities. In addition, most, if not all, students in these schools come from similar social or economic backgrounds. Consequently, they have limited exposure to diversity. An attempt that could be considered to deal with the issue of inclusiveness is fostering inter-group connections. It could be argued that establishing positive interactions with individuals from different religious backgrounds and connecting with people from diverse groups has the potential to create positive experiences that can reduce negative prejudice. However, this initiative needs active support from various stakeholders, including teachers, government authorities, and student guardians. These parties are expected to have a collective awareness of nurturing exclusive relationships between diverse religious adherents.

**Keywords:** Islamic schools, inclusivity, tolerance.

## 1 Consideration to Choose Islamic Schools

Parents take various considerations into account when enrolling their children in school, including distance, quality, curriculum, school environment, and achievements [1]. Nowadays, the Indonesian government has implemented free tuition fees in Indonesian public schools. However, some parents decide to enrol their children in religious-based private schools even though they come at expensive tuition fees. Islamic schools are often the preferred choice, either as the first option or as an alternative if admission to public school is rejected. Through the literature review, Yaacob et al. identified eight key considerations influencing parents' decision to choose private schools, including family background, facilities, curriculum, location, teachers' qualifications, financial aspect, school reputation, and distance between school and home [2].

Although religion is not explicitly listed among these considerations, Yaacob et al. acknowledge its importance by incorporating it into the schools' curriculum. It was influenced by the study of Wilkinson et al., which revealed that parents in Australia

emphasize religion when opting for private schools over public ones [3]. Parents expect their children not only to be exposed to science education but also to have decent knowledge about religious teachings containing moral values. Further, the study of Wilkinson et al., in the Malaysian context, also found that religious curriculum stands out as the primary motive for parents choosing Islamic private schools.

Parents' expectations for their children to acquire religious teachings are reasonable, especially given the rising concerns about teenage violence, such as bullying, online gambling, sexual harassment, or illegal drugs. Amidst these worries, some parents look at religious schools as a rational alternative. In addition, for many individuals, attending an Islamic school is part of strengthening their Islamic identity. Being part of an Islamic private school is a symbol of public piety because parents are considered to pay more attention to religion.

In order to reveal alternative perspective on Islamic private schools, specifically in the matter of inclusivity, I conducted observations of various Islamic schools in Surabaya, made an important note, collect materials available on public sources, and analyze it through academic approach. Further, I also interviewed with key informant recognized as an expert or an influential figure within the schools. The data collection carried out from February to October 2023, revealing that Islamic private schools in Surabaya have diverse characteristics with each distinct potential for exclusiveness.

In Surabaya context, Islamic schools can be broadly classified based on their economic backgrounds and their affiliation with specific Muslim groups. These categories encompass Affluent Islamic private schools (affiliated and non-affiliated) and Low-income Islamic private schools (affiliated and non-affiliated). The affiliation refers to the school's connection with Indonesian Muslim groups, such as NU, Muhammadiyah, or Salafi. Recognizing the affiliation is important as it strongly influences the schools' educational orientation.

Affluent Islamic private schools primarily sustain themselves through high tuition fees paid by students from upper-middle-class backgrounds. The schools have facilities that are beyond average, such as modern classrooms, laboratories equipped with cutting-edge technology, and highly qualified teachers. They cost a lot. For example, in Surabaya, to enrol on such a school requires parents to wait in line a year in advance, with a substantial fee ranging from 16 to 35 million rupiahs, which should be paid once at the beginning of the academic year.

Not every Islamic private school is regarded as prestigious or elite. Some of them are categorized as low-income institutions due to their low fees. These schools heavily rely on government support or donations from other parties. This type of school is often found in sub-urban or rural areas. They lack adequate facilities, such as basic laboratory equipment, suffer from imbalanced teacher-student ratios, and offer limited options for extracurricular activities.

In Indonesia, most, if not all, Islamic private schools are controlled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. They are also affiliated with specific Muslim groups. As a consequence, they should adhere to the government-mandated curriculum and align with the interests of their affiliated Muslim groups. In order to recognize their affiliation, it could be seen from their names. For example, elementary schools supported by Muhammadiyah are typically called SD Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah elementary

school), while those backed by NU bear names like Madrasah Tsanawiyah NU (MTSNU/NU junior high school). Salafi-affiliated schools, although not explicitly named as such, often use terms like Sunna schools. For instance, Cahaya Sunna in Cielungsi, Bogor.

Affiliated schools have the advantage of targeting specific student demographics. Parents associated with NU are less likely to enrol their children in schools outside NU, and vice versa. However, this targeted approach also poses challenges as these schools have limited student diversity. Therefore, some Islamic private schools decide not to affiliate with specific Islamic groups for being neutral. It aims to reach a broader potential. In what follows, I will elaborate on how these diverse Islamic schools, either classified by economic considerations or religious affiliation, deal with the different issues of inclusiveness.

## 2 Potential Aspects of Exclusiveness

In recent days, Islamic private schools have been deemed as a solution to the lack of religious education that parents are unable to provide due to their limited understanding of religion or busy work schedules. These schools are perceived as fostering tolerance, teaching openness, and promoting acceptance towards diverse groups of people, including those from different religions.

Parker argued that integrating religious education into schools is a crucial step towards cultivating an inclusive stance, especially in a country like Indonesia, which is recognized as a religiously diverse nation encompassing various faiths, tribes, and cultures [4]. This emphasis on religious education is a national policy mandated by the Ministry of Education and Culture and should be adhered to either by public or private schools.

However, the emergence of these schools has also given rise to issues related to inclusivity and tolerance. The growth of Islamic schools, whether in Muslim-majority or non-Muslim-majority countries, is often associated with the development of conservative Islam. These institutions are seen as lacking the ability to bridge Islamic thought and contemporary world [5].

Schools grouped based on economic or affiliation aspects face different challenges related to issues of exclusiveness and intolerance due to their different social spectrums. Typically, Islamic private schools in urban areas are equipped with luxury facilities, many choices of extracurricular activities, and high tuition fees. Meanwhile, affiliation of the schools refers to the Muslim groups' connection.

In the sense of affluent schools, social exclusivity becomes a critical concern. Students studying in those schools may share not only the same faith but also the same social class. The parents' incomes are often at the same level, and their professional fields may overlap. This fact poses a challenge in developing social empathy among the students in the schools.

In the context of Britain, White highlighted the difficulty faced by students in high-paying private schools in connecting with lower social groups. This challenge arises because most of their time is spent in schools where students come from homogene-

ous economic backgrounds [6]. It is not inherently immoral but will be problematic if the situation leads students to look down on other people due to a sense of superiority.

The fact shows another side of Islamic private schools, addressing the challenge of inclusivity. Teachers at the school often introduce the particular Quran verses promoting inclusivity to students, encouraging memorization without providing the social context of the verses. As a consequence, it may led to misinterpretation to the verses.

A story comes from my experience. Once, I met a chairman of an affluent Islamic private school in Surabaya. Surprisingly, he decided not to enrol his child at the school where he worked and take his child to another Islamic school. It was not because of high-tuition fees, rather, he doubted whether he could fulfil the potential request from his child for mobile phones like those owned by their peers.

Another story comes from a mother of student at an Islamic school. She said that she had difficulty while trying to access the student pick-up zone at school. According to her, there is a sign on the wall indicating that the area is designated for Women Muslim individuals wearing hijab, while she did not.

Affiliated schools also encounter the issue of exclusiveness. They are perceived to have the intention to introduce their ideologies by inserting them into the curriculum. It was enclosed in subject study or extra classes. The effort, on the one hand, aims to protect specific Muslim groups' ideologies. On the other hand, it potentially leads to an exclusive stance. Affiliated schools have become promising places to cultivate the Muslim groups' tenets.

### 3 Intergroup Connections

Avoiding an exclusive stance might be challenging, but it is possible to minimize it. From a social psychology perspective, Kanas et al. believe that interaction between intergroups remains an effective method for promoting inclusivity [7]. Connecting individuals of different beliefs, ethnicities, and races, both within and between groups, can foster an attitude of mutual recognition, equality and respect. Positive experiences shared between groups have the potential to counter negative judgements against others who are perceived as different.

In the Indonesian context, religion-based schools are expected to foster an inclusive stance that not only introduces a single absolute truth but also serves as plural environments. They may become places where students learn how to appreciate differences. It is believed that introducing various versions of the 'truth' will enhance respect between people from different backgrounds. Moreover, interactions among individuals could significantly influence their attitudes toward one another [8–10].

The term 'contact' refers to cooperation between individuals [11] or direct communication with people from different backgrounds [12]. It includes meeting with neighbours from a different religion or engaging in face-to-face conversations with friends from various Muslim groups. Other scholars added that contact between groups is impactful when it occurs with shared goals or when group members have equal status [10]. In general, most scholars agree that such interactions play a pivotal role in increasing inclusive social relations.

Facilitating interactions among religious adherents is essential to reduce the stigmatization and exclusivity stance toward diverse communities [9]. In recent times, intergroup interactions have shifted in various forms, including indirect contact mediated by technology [13–15]. The Internet has become a platform that enables online gatherings. Scholars pointed out that although the contact is conducted online through online media platforms, it could also reduce stigmatization [13, 15].

In the context of Nigeria, Aydin discovered that nurturing a sense of mutual respect and acceptance of difference in schools is strongly determined by the ability of school management to provide equal academic services to all of their students [16].

Attempts to reduce the potential exclusivity are likely to succeed with the support of influential elite groups. It is hypothesized that individuals might perform positive behaviour individually, and their response could change by the influence of people around them [10]. As a result, the Islamic schools' custodians, including Ustadh, teachers, and all members of the schools' organization, should consistently adopt similar positive approaches to promote inclusivity.

All stakeholders in the academic environment share the responsibility of fostering inclusivity. The government should be able to ensure that religion-based schools provide learning opportunities for students to get to know the ideologies and beliefs of different groups of people. It goes beyond merely the insertion of learning subjects, such as Pancasila or Kewarganegaraan (study of Indonesian citizenship). Further, the schools may also consider organizing school visits to interfaith institutions and providing impressive teaching methods to teach the heterogeneity of culture and beliefs.

Schools also bear significant responsibilities. They should no longer focus on increasing the number of student enrollment or expanding physical infrastructure, but it is equally important to develop learning models that embrace diversity. Initiatives such as interfaith student exchange programs and collaborations among teachers to plan inclusive teaching materials are critical. All these efforts aim to promote unity amidst differences.

Teachers, as key figures, play a critical role. They are expected to serve broad perspectives of the inclusivity principle because a teacher's perspective on the issue of inclusivity determines students' attitudes towards different groups [16]. This fact, according to Parker, is the most challenging issue in promoting inclusive education processes [4]. Similarly, parents should be aware of their child's education process. When children are indicated to behave exclusively, it serves as a warning sign that immediate action is needed.

It is necessary to reflect on the ongoing educational process, specifically in the Indonesian context. Parents should realize that enrolling children in religion-based schools does not guarantee their inclusivity. All stakeholders share the responsibility of fostering social harmony through cooperation between group members and institutional support.

It has to be admitted that this study needs further investigation regarding how graduated students from the Islamic private schools make a relationship with diverse students. The further study will look into whether they tend to act exclusively or inclusively.

## 4 Conclusion

Religious teaching is an important factor influencing parental decision to enrol their children in Islamic private schools. However, these institutions may encounter challenges related to inclusivity due to their limited opportunity for students to engage with peers from various different backgrounds of economic or religions. In order to foster an inclusive stance, it is important to make interventions, such as governmental initiative in designing inclusive curriculum, support from religious authorities in introducing moderate Islam, and active parental involvement to connect their children with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

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