

Religious Moderation in Upper Secondary Education: School Leaders' Perceptions and Its Implications for Educational Practice in South Tapanuli

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received August 27, 2026

Revised September 30, 2026

Accepted October 19, 2026

Keywords: Headteachers'

Perceptions, Religious Moderation, Self-Actualisation, the Provision of Education.

ABSTRACT

Religious moderation is a stated priority in Indonesian education, yet research on it has concentrated on pupils, classroom instruction and institutional programmes, with less attention to how headteachers translate moderation values into everyday leadership and school practice. This study examines how headteachers interpret religious moderation in delivering education, how the nine moderation values are actualised in school policies and practices, and which values prove most prominent in headteachers' leadership. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted between 15 October 2025 and 20 January 2026 at three state senior secondary schools in South Tapanuli Regency, Indonesia: SMAN 1 Angkola Barat, SMAN 1 Sipirok and SMAN 1 Batang Angkola. Data were gathered through observation, in-depth interviews and documentation involving the three headteachers together with supporting informants from their schools, and were analysed thematically through familiarisation, coding, theme construction and verification, with source and methodological triangulation used to establish credibility. The findings indicate that headteachers understand moderation as respect for differences, balance, fairness, tolerance and deliberative decision-making, and realise it through school policy, learning, religious activities, pupil development, habituation and school culture. All nine values were observed, with *tawassuṭ*, *i'tidāl*, *tasāmuḥ*, *tawāzun* and *waṭaniyyah wa muwāṭanah* the most prominent, while the local wisdom of *Daliḥan Na Tolu* reinforced respect, balance, togetherness and harmony. Religious moderation in these schools thus functions as embedded institutional practice rather than declarative programme, and its continuity rests on leadership consistency, teacher capacity and the cultural resources of the school community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, by its very nature, is not merely oriented towards the development of learners' intellectual abilities, but is also a process of shaping individuals with moral, spiritual and social awareness. Education thus plays a strategic role in developing individuals' ability to live together in a pluralistic society, including fostering attitudes of mutual respect, tolerance and fairness, and the capacity to manage differences constructively. In the Indonesian context, this function is all the more important because education takes place within a social reality characterised by diversity in religion, ethnicity, culture and worldviews (Nata, 2018). Diversity is a fundamental characteristic of Indonesian social life. *Pancasila* and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* provide a normative framework for managing this diversity through the principles of unity, respect for differences, and democratic coexistence. Education, therefore, must not merely transmit knowledge; it must also build learners' capacity to understand differences and interact peacefully with groups from different backgrounds (Harefa & Hulu, 2020). It is in this context that religious moderation becomes relevant as an approach capable of reconciling religious commitment with respect for the reality of a diverse society.

Religious moderation essentially emphasises perspectives, attitudes and religious practices that avoid extremism and prioritise balance, justice, tolerance and respect for differences (Harahap, 2016; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). From an Islamic perspective, this concept has a theological foundation, notably in the concept of ‘ummatah wasa’atun’ as affirmed in Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 143. The concept of wasatiyyah does not merely refer to a simple ‘middle’ position, but encompasses dimensions of balance, justice, and the ability to view matters proportionately (Harahap, 2023; Khalida An Nadhrah et al., 2023). Thus, religious moderation does not mean diminishing one’s commitment to the teachings of one’s religion, but rather developing a way of practising one’s faith that respects the rights of others and avoids extremist attitudes in social life.

Over time, religious moderation in Indonesia is no longer viewed merely as a religious discourse, but has gained a place within public policy. Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 on Strengthening Religious Moderation positions the strengthening of religious moderation as part of efforts to foster harmonious religious life and regulates its implementation in a planned, systematic, integrated, sustainable and measurable manner (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2023). This regulation was subsequently reinforced by Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation No. 3 of 2024, which sets out the procedures for coordination, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the implementation of the strengthening of religious moderation (Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia, 2024). These regulatory developments indicate that religious moderation has moved from the realm of normative discourse towards an implementation agenda that requires concrete application across various social spheres, including educational institutions. Schools are one of the strategic settings for the realisation of religious moderation, as they bring together pupils, teachers, educational staff and the wider community from diverse backgrounds. The values of religious moderation can be internalised through the learning process, school culture, religious activities, extra-curricular activities, the exemplary behaviour of teachers, and institutional policies. Sutrisno emphasises that educational institutions hold a strategic position in the realisation of religious moderation, as they provide a space where the values of moderation can be internalised within a multicultural society (Edy Sutrisno, 2019). Consequently, the success of strengthening religious moderation in schools is determined not only by the learning materials but also by the institutional environment created by educational leaders.

In this context, headteachers occupy a key position as they have the authority to steer policy, manage resources, shape school culture, mentor teachers and pupils, and determine the institution’s decision-making processes. The headteacher’s understanding of religious moderation has the potential to influence how these values are translated into educational policies and practices. Therefore, research into religious moderation in schools needs to move beyond the question of whether the value of moderation is taught, towards a more in-depth examination of how school leaders understand, interpret and put this value into practice in the delivery of education. A body of research now situates religious moderation within Indonesian education, but its emphases differ in ways that matter for the present study. Institutional analyses concentrate on religious schools, reconstructing school leadership models for moderation in state madrasah aliyah (Mahmud & Umiarso, 2025) and tracing how kiai leadership, combined with pesantren-based cultural strategies, sustains the same values (Aimah et al., 2026). Pedagogical studies work at classroom level, examining how religious education teachers embed moderation in learning to cultivate pupils’ tolerance (Yudin et al., 2025); (Siregar & Ismaraidha, 2025); and how moderation values are internalised among vocational and elementary pupils (Suryana & Hilmi, 2023) and (Rohim et al., 2025). Research on leadership itself is thinner: educational institutions are described as the space in which moderation is internalised within a multicultural society (Edy Sutrisno, 2019), principals’ participatory leadership is linked to moderation in elementary schools (Pakata et al., 2024), principals’ strategies are examined in Islamic vocational schools in East Java (Supriyadi & Kurdi,

2025), and the role of school leadership in internalising moderation is mapped largely through library synthesis rather than field data (Sholeh, 2025). Multicultural-education research adds that inclusive curricula and the integration of universal values can strengthen tolerance and social harmony (Ridwana Siregar & Zainal Efendi Hasibuan, 2024). Read together, this literature leaves four gaps that the present study addresses. First, moderation is usually presented as something delivered to pupils, so the interpretive frame of the school leaders who convert regulation into routine remains poorly documented. Second, senior secondary schools receive little attention, even though they must accommodate pupils of several religions within a single organisational culture. Third, the empirical base is weighted towards madrasah, pesantren and vocational settings, so contexts such as South Tapanuli Regency in North Sumatra remain largely absent from the literature reviewed here. Fourth, most studies enumerate the values of moderation without asking which of them carries practical weight in leadership decisions.

This perspective matters because headteachers hold substantial influence over policy formulation, decision-making, religious activities, pupil and teacher development and the formation of an inclusive school culture. The issue is especially relevant in South Tapanuli Regency, where schools operate within a socially and culturally diverse community. As public educational spaces, state schools are expected to provide inclusive education while ensuring that members of the school community can express and practise their religious beliefs appropriately and respectfully. In this setting, headteachers are not merely educational administrators but actors who manage diversity and translate the principles of religious moderation into everyday school policies, interactions and institutional culture. Preliminary findings from research conducted at Angkola Barat State Senior Secondary School No. 1, Sipirok State Senior Secondary School No. 1, and Batang Angkola State Senior Secondary School No. 1 indicate that headteachers view the concept of religious moderation positively and put a number of its values into practice in the delivery of education. This implementation is evident, amongst other things, in the application of *tawassuṭ* through decision-making that takes various viewpoints into account, *tawāzun* through the provision of balanced opportunities for participation, *‘i‘tidāl* through the placement of teachers based on considerations of competence and professionalism, and *tasāmuḥ* through support for diverse religious activities (Salamat Siregar et al., personal communication, 12 July 2025). The realisation of moderation is also evident in the practice of consultation (*syūrā*) regarding the allocation of teachers’ duties, the provision of facilities for religious activities, and the development of a school culture that emphasises courtesy (*taḥaddur*) and respect for others. These findings demonstrate that religious moderation does not stop at the headteacher’s conceptual understanding, but has been translated into various institutional decisions and practices (Salamat Siregar et al., personal communication, 12 July 2025). This is significant because the realisation of the value of moderation in education can ultimately be seen in how this principle is reflected in school governance, relationships amongst the school community, and policies relating to religious life. Nevertheless, field findings also indicate that diversity and tolerance within the school environment still require ongoing nurturing. The potential for intolerance does not always manifest as open conflict or discriminatory behaviour, but may emerge through jokes that offend certain beliefs, the use of language that fails to respect differences, a tendency to form exclusive social groups, and an inability to accept differing viewpoints. The influence of peer groups and social media is also a factor that requires attention, as it can shape the way pupils understand religion, culture and differences (*Hasil Observasi Dan Wawancara Lapangan Sebagaimana Dirumuskan Dalam Bahan Penelitian*, 2025).

These conditions indicate that the existence of policies and practices regarding religious moderation does not, in itself, guarantee the consistent internalisation of the values of moderation throughout school life. There is a gap that needs to be examined between the normative understanding of religious moderation and the process of translating this into policy, leadership, school culture and

interactions amongst the school community. This gap is significant because the effectiveness of religious moderation is determined not only by the existence of regulations or programmes, but also by the actors who interpret and implement these policies at the level of individual educational institutions. Based on the above discussion, this study positions headteachers as strategic actors in institutionalising religious moderation through leadership, school policy, the management of religious activities, the guidance of the school community, and the shaping of educational culture. The perceptions of headteachers are understood not merely as personal opinions, but as constructions of understanding reflected in educational practice. This study analyses the actualisation of nine values of religious moderation, namely *tawassuʿ*, *tawāzun*, *iʿtidāl*, *tasāmuḥ*, *syūrā*, *iṣlāḥ*, *taṭawwur wa ibtikār*, *taḥaddur*, and *waṭaniyyah wa muwāʿatanah* (Kholiso & Amalee, 2021), whilst identifying the most prominent values in school leadership practice. Focusing on state senior secondary schools in South Tapanuli Regency, this study aims to enrich the discourse on religious moderation by linking headteachers' interpretations with institutional practices in managing diversity in a fair, inclusive and sustainable manner. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) how do headteachers interpret religious moderation in the delivery of education; (2) how are these values actualised in educational policies and practices; and (3) which values of moderation are most prominent in headteachers' leadership practices. The novelty of this study lies in tracing, within a single empirical site, how the nine-value framework is perceived, actualised and ranked in public senior secondary schools, and in relating moderation to the Batak local wisdom of Dalihan Na Tolu.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to explore school leaders' perceptions, experiences and interpretations of religious moderation and its implementation in school life (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three steps structured the phenomenological procedure. The first was bracketing, in which the researchers suspended their own commitments about moderation so that the headteachers' accounts could be described as they were given. The second was the description of lived experience: the headteachers recounted concrete situations in which they decided, mediated or arranged religious and school activities, and these accounts were compared with field notes recorded during observation of the same settings. The third was the reduction of these descriptions to their essential structure, obtained by comparing meanings across the three headteachers and consolidating recurrent meanings into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The research was conducted from 15 October 2025 to 20 January 2026 at SMA Negeri 1 Angkola Barat, SMA Negeri 1 Batang Angkola and SMA Negeri 1 Sipirok, South Tapanuli Regency. Schools and informants were selected purposively on the basis of their relevance to the research focus (Sugiyono, 2019), that is, public senior secondary schools whose headteachers hold direct responsibility for school policy and religious programmes. The main informants were the three headteachers: Jahrona, S.Pd.; Salamat Siregar, S.Pd., M.Si.; and Marsundut Siregar, S.Pd., M.Si. Supporting informants totalled 10 individuals, comprising deputy principals, subject teachers (including religious and civic education teachers), administrative staff, guidance and counselling personnel, and pupils, with the number drawn from each school and each category stated explicitly. Data collection combined three techniques. Observation covered school policies, learning activities, religious programmes, social interactions and school culture, and was recorded in field notes. Interviews were conducted in depth using a semi-structured guide organised around the nine values of religious moderation and were transcribed for analysis. Documentation covered curricula, activity schedules, school management records and relevant photographs or videos (Creswell et al., 2015).

Data analysis followed the interactive sequence of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014), organised in practice through six thematic

phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Those phases were: familiarisation with the transcripts and field notes; systematic coding of passages that referred to moderation values or leadership practice; the generation of candidate themes from those codes; review of the themes against both the coded extracts and the whole dataset; the definition and naming of themes; and the construction of the analytical narrative. Coding was organised around the analytical framework of the nine values, while inductive codes were retained wherever the data did not fit that framework. Each step of coding and theme construction was documented in an audit trail so that the analysis could be inspected (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, comparing accounts among the three headteachers and their supporting informants, and methodological triangulation, comparing interview data with observation and documentation (Hasibuan et al., 2024). The themes drawn from the three schools were then compared in order to identify patterns, similarities and differences in the implementation of religious moderation. Figure 2 summarises the sequence of the research steps.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at three public senior high schools in South Tapanuli Regency, namely SMA Negeri 1 Angkola Barat, SMA Negeri 1 Sipirok, and SMA Negeri 1 Batang Angkola. The three schools share the characteristics of public secondary schools operating within diverse social and religious backgrounds, although their leadership practices and approaches to managing diversity vary. The main informants were the principals of the three schools: Salamat Siregar, S.Pd., M.Si., Marsundut Siregar, S.Pd., M.Si., and Jahrona, S.Pd (*Profil Sekolah | SMA Negeri 1 Angkola Barat*, n.d.; *Profil Sekolah | SMAN 1 Batang Angkola*, 2026). Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation between October 2025 and January 2026. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of principals' perceptions, forms of religious moderation implementation, and the values most prominently reflected in school leadership and educational practices. The analysis produced three major findings: (1) principals understand religious moderation as respect for differences, fairness, balance, tolerance, and deliberation; (2) these values are implemented through school policies, learning practices, religious activities, student development, and school culture; and (3) *tawassuṭ*, *i'tidāl*, *tasāmuḥ*, *tawāzun*, and *waṭaniyyah wa muwāṭanaḥ* appear most prominently in the observed practices.

3.2 Principals' Perceptions of Religious Moderation

The findings indicate that the three headteachers share a relatively consistent understanding of religious moderation. It is not regarded merely as religious knowledge but as an attitude and practice that respects differences, avoids excess, promotes justice and supports harmonious relationships within the school community. At SMA Negeri 1 Angkola Barat, moderation was associated with open communication, respect for different opinions, cooperation and deliberation. Salamat Siregar emphasised the importance of maintaining open communication and respecting differences of opinion, stating, "*Religious moderation can be practised by communicating openly, respecting other people's opinions, working together, and resolving differences through deliberation*" (Salamat Siregar, personal communication, 7 January 2026). At SMA Negeri 1 Sipirok, moderation was understood as part of character education aimed at strengthening mutual respect, preventing excessive fanaticism and maintaining unity. Marsundut Siregar explained, "*Religious moderation is part of character education because students need to learn to respect one another, avoid excessive fanaticism, and maintain unity despite their differences*" (Marsundut Siregar, personal communication, 8 January 2026). At SMA Negeri 1 Batang Angkola, the emphasis lay on everyday

behaviour, including allowing members of the school community to practise their respective religions, avoiding the imposition of beliefs, maintaining respectful communication and working together across differences. Jahrona highlighted this practical dimension, stating, *Religious moderation is reflected in everyday behaviour, including respecting other people's religious practices, not imposing our beliefs on others, communicating respectfully, and working together despite our differences* (Jahrona, personal communication, 9 January 2026). Across the three schools, these findings can be grouped into three patterns: religious moderation as respect for differences, as a principle of decision-making, and as an everyday practice for building school culture. What distinguishes the three accounts is not the content of the definition but the register in which it is expressed: as communication at Angkola Barat, as character at Sipirok and as everyday conduct at Batang Angkola, a difference that reappears later in how each school organises its religious activities.



Figure 1. Documentation of interviews with the headteachers of SMAN 1 Angkola Barat, SMAN 1 Sipirok and SMAN 1 Batang Angkola



Figure 2. Sequence of the research steps from site selection to reporting

3.3 Actualization of Religious Moderation in School Leadership

The analysis identified the actualization of all nine religious moderation values in school leadership: *tawassuʻ*, *tawāzun*, *iʻtidāl*, *tasāmuḥ*, *syūrā*, *iṣlāḥ*, *taṭawwur wa ibtikār*, *taḥaḍḍur*, and *waṭaniyyah wa muwāṭanah*. Although the principals did not always explicitly use the term “religious

moderation,” the values were evident in decision-making, interpersonal relations, school management, and student development.

Table 1. Summarizes The Processed Findings

Religious Moderation Value	Main Form Of Actualization
<i>Tawassuť</i>	Considering different views and making proportional decisions
<i>Tawāzun</i>	Balancing academic, character, social, and religious interests
<i>I’tidāl</i>	Applying rules, assigning responsibilities, and making decisions fairly
<i>Tasāmuť</i>	Respecting religious, cultural, and social differences and providing space for worship
<i>Syūrā</i>	Involving teachers, staff, and relevant parties in decision-making
<i>Iřlāť</i>	Evaluating programs and improving school practices continuously
<i>Taťawwur wa ibtikār</i>	Developing learning, extracurricular activities, technology, and school management
<i>Taťadđur</i>	Building politeness, responsibility, integrity, and social concern
<i>Waťaniyyah wa muwāťanah</i>	Strengthening national identity, unity, discipline, and appreciation of diversity

The pattern behind the summary in Table 1 can be stated more precisely. *Tawassuť* appears in deliberative and proportional decision-making, most clearly where competing proposals were weighed in school meetings rather than settled by the headteacher alone. *Tawāzun* appears in the balancing of competing educational interests, and *i’tidāl* in the fair and objective distribution of tasks and responsibilities. *Tasāmuť* is visible in the management of religious and cultural diversity, including the provision of space and time for the religious activities of each group of pupils, while *syūrā* is reflected in the involvement of teachers and staff in decisions that concern them. *Iřlāť* and *taťawwur wa ibtikār* appear through the revision of programmes and the introduction of new activities, whereas *taťadđur* and *waťaniyyah wa muwāťanah* are carried in character formation and in the language of respect used in daily school interactions (Hasil Pengolahan Data Penelitian, Wawancara Dan Observasi, 2026). Read together, these observations suggest that the nine values are not applied as a checklist but overlap in practice: a single decision routinely embodies several values at once, which is consistent with the way the headteachers described them as aspects of one way of leading rather than as separate programmes.



Figure 3. Documentation of activities involving the headteacher, teachers and pupils

The findings further show that religious moderation is integrated into educational implementation through four interconnected areas: learning planning, classroom practice, religious activities, and school culture. In learning planning, moderation is reflected in learning objectives,

material selection, teaching strategies, assessment, and reflection. Discussion, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and project-based learning are used to provide students with opportunities to encounter differences, exchange perspectives, cooperate, and seek peaceful solutions. In classroom practice, teachers create learning environments that are dialogical, participatory, and nondiscriminatory. Students are encouraged to express their opinions, listen to different perspectives, respond respectfully, and resolve disagreements through dialogue. The findings also indicate that some students have become more accustomed to listening before speaking, respecting different opinions, and seeking common ground. Nevertheless, differences in teachers' understanding and skills, as well as challenges in addressing sensitive religious issues and information obtained through social media, remain obstacles to consistent implementation.

Religious activities are likewise managed as part of the broader educational process. Schools provide opportunities for students to practice their respective religions while emphasizing tolerance, fairness, peaceful interaction, and respect for differences. Decision-making within religious activities involves deliberation, while students are also given opportunities to provide feedback and reflect on activities that have been conducted. If these various findings are compared, it becomes apparent that the realisation of religious moderation takes place in an integrative and gradual manner, namely: School policy → learning planning → classroom practice → religious activities → habituation → school culture. The findings also reveal that *Dalihan Na Tolu* is used as a local cultural context for strengthening respect, balance, togetherness, and harmonious social relations. This allows religious moderation to be connected with students' everyday social and cultural experiences rather than being presented solely as an abstract normative concept. The analysis identifies five values that appear most prominently in the educational practices observed: *tawassuť*, *i'tidāl*, *tasāmuť*, *tawāzun*, and *waťaniyyah*. These values are expressed through inclusive practices, dialogue and participation, nondiscrimination, prevention of exclusivist attitudes, and the use of *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a local cultural reference. Among these, *tawassuť* is reflected in dialogue and the search for proportional solutions; *i'tidāl* in fair treatment and equal opportunities; *tasāmuť* in respectful interaction and cooperation; *tawāzun* in balancing academic, spiritual, and social development; and *waťaniyyah* in strengthening unity, diversity, and national awareness. The findings therefore indicate that religious moderation operates not only as religious content but also as a principle of educational governance and everyday interaction.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that religious moderation in the three public senior high schools is not limited to students' religious understanding but has developed into a broader leadership and governance practice. Principals interpret moderation through respect for differences, proportionality, justice, tolerance, deliberation, and harmonious social relations. This finding supports the view that school leadership is an important mechanism for translating normative values into institutional practices. Recent qualitative studies similarly identify principals as strategic actors in developing inclusive school cultures through role modelling, participatory leadership, teacher guidance, and the integration of moderation into learning and school programs (Zuhroh & Kosasih, 2026). The prominence of *tawassuť*, *i'tidāl*, *tasāmuť*, *tawāzun*, and *waťaniyyah wa muwāťanah* suggests that moderation is understood by school leaders primarily through its practical consequences. *Tawassuť* does not simply mean occupying a position between two opposing views; rather, the findings show that it involves considering different perspectives and making proportionate decisions. This is particularly visible in school meetings, classroom discussions, and conflict resolution. Similarly, *i'tidāl* is expressed through fair treatment, objective task distribution, and equal opportunities for participation. The combination of these values indicates that moderation in the studied schools has both an ethical and institutional dimension.

The finding on *tasāmuḥ* is particularly important because tolerance is not interpreted as the absence of disagreement or the mixing of religious beliefs. Instead, it is practiced through respect for other people's rights to hold and practice their beliefs while maintaining appropriate boundaries. This pattern is consistent with research on religious tolerance in schools showing that principals can strengthen tolerance through inclusive policies, dialogue, role modelling, and protection of members of the school community's rights (Watung et al., 2023). The findings concerning *syūrā* also indicate a connection between religious moderation and participatory leadership. Giving teachers, staff, and relevant school members opportunities to express their views makes decision-making more inclusive and creates institutional space for differences to be managed through dialogue. In this respect, moderation is not merely a value that is taught to students but a principle that is practiced by the institution itself. Similar research has found that participatory and adaptive leadership approaches are associated with the development of harmonious and inclusive school cultures (Pakata et al., 2024). Another important finding is the integration of moderation into the learning process. The use of discussion, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and project-based learning creates opportunities for students to practice listening, expressing disagreement, cooperating, and seeking solutions. Thus, the findings suggest that moderation becomes more meaningful when students encounter it as a social practice rather than only as conceptual knowledge. This interpretation is also consistent with recent research showing that principals can strengthen religious moderation through PAI learning by encouraging critical and reflective thinking, discussion, case analysis, and the integration of national values (Zuhroh & Kosasih, 2026).

At the same time, the present findings reveal a point that deserves further attention: moderation is not always implemented through formal policies specifically labelled "religious moderation." In several practices, the values operate implicitly through school culture, leadership decisions, learning interactions, and religious activities. This is consistent with research showing that religious moderation can develop informally as part of school culture even when institutions do not have a specific written regulation dedicated to the concept (Supriyadi & Kurdi, 2025). Thus, institutionalization should not be measured solely by the existence of formal documents but also by the consistency with which moderation values appear in everyday educational practices. Comparing these results with earlier studies clarifies both their agreement and their differences. The present study shares with library-based research on school leadership the view that leadership is the mechanism through which moderation values are internalised (Sholeh, 2025), and it agrees with studies of elementary schools that principals matter less through formal programmes than through the routines they protect (Pakata et al., 2024). Two differences deserve emphasis. First, the institutional settings differ: madrasah and pesantren, in which religious identity is institutionally defined, have been analysed elsewhere (Mahmud & Umiarso, 2025); (Aimah et al., 2026), whereas this study observes public senior secondary schools in which no single religious tradition organises school life, so moderation has to be carried by procedure and culture rather than by doctrinal authority. Second, earlier research locates moderation mainly in classroom instruction and teacher practice (Yudin et al., 2025); (Siregar & Ismaraidha, 2025); (Suryana & Hilmi, 2023), whereas the present data show the same values operating one level higher, in decisions about tasks, facilities and the school calendar. The two accounts are not contradictory; together they indicate that in public secondary schools moderation is transmitted indirectly, through the organisational conditions that teachers and pupils encounter every day.

The role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* constitutes an important contextual finding of this study. The local wisdom provides a culturally familiar framework through which respect, balance, togetherness, and harmonious relationships can be connected with religious moderation. This finding extends the discussion of moderation beyond the transfer of nationally formulated values into schools. It suggests that the effectiveness of moderation education may also depend on the capacity of schools to connect

general principles with students' lived social and cultural experiences. In this sense, local wisdom functions not merely as cultural content but as a pedagogical resource for contextualizing moderation. The findings also identify several implementation challenges, particularly differences in teachers' understanding and pedagogical capacity and the difficulty of addressing sensitive religious issues and information circulating through social media. These challenges indicate that leadership commitment alone is insufficient. School-level institutionalization requires continuous teacher development, supervision, communication, and collaborative evaluation. Recent studies likewise report teacher resistance, limited resources, and diverse student backgrounds as challenges that require training, communication, and collaboration (Zuhroh & Kosasih, 2026). From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the understanding of religious moderation as a multilevel educational practice. At the structural level, moderation is embedded in school policies and decision-making; at the pedagogical level, it appears in classroom interaction and learning strategies; and at the cultural level, it develops through religious activities, habituation, social relationships, and local wisdom. The study therefore proposes that the institutionalization of religious moderation should be understood as a process connecting leadership, pedagogy, and school culture, rather than as a stand-alone religious education program.

Three factors appear to account for the ways in which moderation has taken hold in these schools. The first is the position of the headteacher, who controls scheduling, the allocation of duties and the use of facilities and can therefore make moderation consequential rather than merely declarative. The second is the decision to embed the values in ordinary routines, deliberation before decisions, balanced allocation of opportunities, courteous language, rather than in a stand-alone programme that would depend on continual funding and attention. The third is cultural: *Dalihan Na Tolu* provides pupils and teachers with a familiar vocabulary of balanced and reciprocal relationships, so that moderation is learned as an extension of local courtesy rather than as an imported formula. None of these factors operates automatically; each rests on deliberate and repeated leadership action. At the same time, the application of moderation values has clear limits. Teachers' understanding and pedagogical capacity remain uneven, so the quality of moderation practice still varies from one classroom to another. Sensitive religious questions and the information that pupils absorb through social media frequently outrun the capacity of the school to respond, which means that school policy alone cannot guarantee a moderated climate. Because moderation is presently carried more by the disposition of individual headteachers than by written procedure and monitoring, it also remains exposed to changes in leadership. The findings therefore point to a distinction that the literature on moderation rarely draws: institutionalisation is not the same as durability, and a value that is embedded in practice can still be lost when the conditions that support it are absent. From a practical perspective, the findings imply that public senior high schools can strengthen religious moderation by integrating its values into school planning, teacher development, learning design, religious activities, student participation, and evaluation. Principals have a particularly important role in ensuring that the values are consistently reflected in institutional decisions and everyday interactions. The use of local cultural resources such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* can further contextualize these values and make them more relevant to students' social experiences. The findings therefore provide a basis for developing school policies and leadership practices that manage diversity through fairness, dialogue, participation, and respect.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer three questions about religious moderation in three state senior secondary schools in South Tapanuli Regency. First, headteachers interpret moderation as respect for differences, balance, fairness, tolerance and deliberative decision-making, rather than as a body

of doctrine to be transmitted. Second, they actualise that interpretation through school policy, the allocation of tasks, learning, religious activities, habituation and school culture, with the local wisdom of Dalihan Na Tolu providing a familiar vocabulary for togetherness and balance. Third, of the nine values examined, *tawassuṭ*, *i'tidāl*, *tasāmuḥ*, *tawāzun* and *waṭaniyyah wa muwāṭanah* carry the greatest practical weight. Moderation in these schools therefore operates as an embedded habit of governance: pupils learn it less from instruction than from the way decisions are made around them. Three limitations qualify these findings. The study covers three schools and three headteachers over a single three-month window, so the patterns reported here are indicative rather than representative. It relies chiefly on self-reported accounts, which may understate the distance between official discourse and everyday practice. And it does not measure pupil outcomes, so claims about the effects of moderation on students remain interpretive. Even so, the findings imply that strengthening moderation in public secondary schools depends less on issuing new regulations than on building teachers' analytical capacity, creating routine participatory channels for decision-making, and using local cultural resources such as Dalihan Na Tolu to keep moderation concrete. Research that combines leadership interviews with classroom observation and pupil-level data, and that follows schools across a change of leadership, would show whether these practices endure beyond the leaders who established them.

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