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The Paradox of Inclusivity: Mitigating Sectarian Polarization through Cross-Cultural Dialogue in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

Background. Modern Islamic boarding schools increasingly experience internal religious diversity that can enrich educational interactions while also creating sectarian boundaries, stereotypes, and social distance when differences are not constructively managed. Therefore, an inclusive educational framework is needed to strengthen students' ability to understand and engage with religious diversity without weakening their Islamic commitment.

Purpose. This study aimed to develop and refine a cross-cultural dialogue curriculum that enhances students' capacity to engage with doctrinal, jurisprudential, organizational, and cultural differences through a balanced Islamic educational approach.

Method. A Design-Based Research approach was employed through contextual analysis, curriculum development, two iterative implementation cycles, classroom observations, student reflections, teacher interviews, and expert evaluations. Data were analyzed qualitatively to examine curriculum effectiveness, student responses, and pedagogical improvements.

Results. The findings demonstrate progressive improvements in students' dialogic competence, perspective-taking skills, tolerance toward interpretive differences, intergroup trust, and inclusive participation in learning activities. Islamic principles, including *adab al-ikhtilaf*, *ta'aruf*, *ukhuwah*, *tasamuh*, *rahmah*, and *wasatiyyah*, became more applicable when integrated into structured dialogue, comparative interpretation, collaborative inquiry, and respectful disagreement practices. The curriculum also contributed to reducing sectarian boundary perceptions among students.

Conclusion. This study concludes that inclusivity in Islamic boarding schools is strengthened not by removing theological differences but by transforming how such differences are understood, discussed, and socially negotiated through education. The developed framework provides an adaptable curriculum model for fostering religious harmony, preserving Islamic identity, and maintaining communal cohesion within diverse contemporary Islamic educational settings.

KEYWORDS

Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Islamic Boarding School, Inclusive Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Islamic boarding schools increasingly operate within socially diverse environments shaped by religious plurality, internal denominational differences, cultural mobility, digital communication, and expanding interaction with national and global communities. These institutions are expected to preserve Islamic identity while

preparing students to participate constructively in societies characterized by difference. Religious education in such settings therefore involves more than the transmission of doctrinal knowledge; it also shapes perceptions of belonging, authority, difference, and legitimate disagreement (Beiler & Marti, 2025; Lei dkk., 2026; Mansouri dkk., 2026). The growing complexity of contemporary Muslim societies has made the ability to engage intra-Muslim and cross-cultural diversity an important educational competency. Islamic boarding schools consequently occupy a strategic position in cultivating religious conviction that remains compatible with dialogue, mutual recognition, social cohesion, and respect for differences in religious interpretation.

Sectarian polarization can emerge when theological, jurisprudential, political, or organizational differences are transformed from legitimate disagreements into rigid boundaries of social identity. Students may encounter competing religious claims through teachers, family networks, organizations, religious authorities, social media, online preaching, and peer communities (Ascarya, 2026; Hambari dkk., 2026; Muriyatmoko dkk., 2025). Repeated exposure to exclusionary narratives can encourage binary distinctions between orthodox and deviant, authentic and corrupted, loyal and disloyal, or pure and compromised groups. Such polarization does not arise automatically from doctrinal difference itself. The educational problem emerges when differences are interpreted through suspicion, stereotyping, moral superiority, or social distancing and when students lack the intellectual and relational capacities required to engage disagreement without delegitimizing the humanity or religious sincerity of others.

Cross-cultural dialogue offers a potentially important educational response because it creates structured opportunities for learners to encounter alternative experiences, interpretations, cultural practices, and forms of religious expression (Irijanto dkk., 2026; Nofianti dkk., 2026; Ruldeviyani dkk., 2024). Dialogue differs from simple coexistence because it requires active listening, reciprocal explanation, perspective-taking, and willingness to examine one's assumptions. Islamic educational values such as ta'aruf, ukhuwah, tasamuh, rahmah, adab al-ikhtilaf, and wasatiyyah can provide normative resources for developing dialogic engagement without requiring doctrinal relativism. The central educational challenge is therefore to transform these values from abstract moral principles into practices through which students learn to maintain conviction while recognizing legitimate diversity within and beyond Muslim communities.

Inclusive rhetoric within religious education does not always produce inclusive educational practice. Islamic boarding schools may publicly promote tolerance, brotherhood, and moderation while students continue to experience subtle forms of boundary-making in classroom language, peer interaction, religious rituals, organizational affiliation, or interpretations of competing schools of thought (Laila dkk., 2024; Prasojo dkk., 2025; Zaluchu dkk., 2025). This tension constitutes the paradox of inclusivity addressed in the present study. An institution can endorse pluralism at the level of official discourse while preserving social practices that reinforce epistemic closure or sectarian distance. The problem therefore concerns the gap between the declared values of inclusion and the everyday pedagogical processes through which students learn who belongs, whose interpretations are respected, and which differences are regarded as legitimate.

Pedagogical practices may unintentionally intensify polarization when religious differences are presented through one-dimensional representations. Students who encounter rival traditions only through descriptions produced by their own group may develop knowledge about others without ever understanding how those communities describe themselves (Nuha dkk., 2024; Odoi-Yorke dkk., 2025; Pusparini dkk., 2024). Teacher-centered instruction can further strengthen this problem when authoritative explanations are accepted without opportunities for questioning, comparison, contextual analysis, or direct encounter. Sectarian attitudes may therefore persist not because

students possess excessive religious knowledge but because their knowledge of difference is narrow, mediated, and socially insulated. Cross-cultural dialogue becomes relevant precisely because it introduces relational and interpretive complexity into educational contexts where boundaries may otherwise remain unquestioned.

Attempts to strengthen inclusivity can also generate unintended consequences when dialogue is poorly designed (Ariatin dkk., 2023; Lassa dkk., 2023; Natalis dkk., 2025). Encouraging students to discuss controversial religious differences without adequate preparation may reinforce existing stereotypes, create defensive reactions, or turn dialogue into competition over theological superiority. Institutional pressure to emphasize harmony may produce superficial agreement while discouraging legitimate disagreement. The problem is therefore not simply the absence of dialogue but the absence of a pedagogically coherent model for conducting dialogue. Effective cross-cultural dialogue must create intellectual openness without demanding theological surrender, protect minority viewpoints without silencing majority traditions, and encourage critical engagement without converting the classroom into an arena of sectarian confrontation.

The primary objective of this study is to formulate an educational framework for mitigating sectarian polarization through cross-cultural dialogue in modern Islamic boarding schools (Du dkk., 2024; Rosemary dkk., 2026; Somaiah & Yeoh, 2023). The study seeks to identify the pedagogical conditions under which students can encounter religious and cultural differences without experiencing dialogue as a threat to identity. Particular attention should be directed toward the development of respectful disagreement, interpretive humility, perspective-taking, relational trust, and recognition of shared ethical commitments. The intended framework should enable Islamic boarding schools to preserve their religious orientation while creating learning environments in which doctrinal and cultural diversity can be discussed constructively.

The analytical objective is to examine how sectarian boundaries are produced, reproduced, softened, or challenged through everyday educational discourse and interaction (Gazeaud & Ricard, 2024; Karim dkk., 2025; Santoso dkk., 2026). Classroom communication, teacher explanations, peer conversations, religious instruction, organizational narratives, and culturally embedded practices can all shape students' understandings of religious difference. The study should explore how concepts such as adab al-ikhtilaf, ta'aruf, tasamuh, ukhuwah, and wasatiyyah can be translated into mechanisms for dialogic learning. Attention should also be given to the distinction between theological disagreement and social exclusion, because disagreement in doctrine or jurisprudence does not necessarily require hostility, discrimination, or withdrawal from common civic relationships.

The practical objective is to develop educational principles that can guide curriculum design, teacher facilitation, student interaction, and institutional policy (Haddade dkk., 2024; Muttaqin dkk., 2025; Shabur & Ali, 2024). Dialogic strategies may include comparative interpretation, structured intergroup discussion, collaborative problem-solving, reflective storytelling, case analysis, perspective-taking, cultural exchange, and facilitated examination of contested religious narratives. These approaches should help students distinguish disagreement from delegitimization and theological conviction from social antagonism. The expected outcome is a pedagogical architecture that can be adapted by Islamic boarding schools seeking to strengthen internal cohesion while preparing students for responsible participation in culturally and religiously plural societies.

Existing scholarship on Islamic boarding schools has extensively examined religious education, institutional transformation, curriculum reform, leadership, modernization, character formation, religious moderation, and responses to social change (Jahan dkk., 2025; Wang dkk., 2026; Zara, 2024). Research on tolerance and moderation has also expanded significantly,

particularly in relation to the role of Islamic educational institutions in promoting peaceful citizenship and preventing extremism. Much of this literature emphasizes normative commitment to moderation or measures students' attitudes toward tolerance. Fewer studies investigate the micro-pedagogical processes through which learners actually develop the capacity to engage sectarian differences, negotiate competing interpretations, and maintain respectful relationships across religious boundaries.

Research on intergroup contact and dialogue demonstrates that meaningful interaction can reduce prejudice under particular conditions, especially when participants encounter one another as legitimate interlocutors rather than abstract categories (Adiningrum dkk., 2026; Mu'alimin dkk., 2026; Naldi dkk., 2026). Multicultural and intercultural education similarly emphasizes perspective-taking, reciprocal recognition, cultural literacy, and communication across difference. These traditions provide strong theoretical foundations, yet their application to intra-Muslim sectarian diversity within Islamic boarding schools remains comparatively underdeveloped. Cross-cultural dialogue is often associated with interreligious relations, while differences among Muslim schools of thought, organizations, ritual traditions, and theological orientations receive less systematic pedagogical attention.

A deeper gap concerns the limited integration of Islamic ethics of disagreement with contemporary dialogic pedagogy. Islamic intellectual history contains sophisticated traditions concerning disagreement, scholarly plurality, legal interpretation, and ethical conduct toward competing positions. Concepts associated with adab al-ikhtilaf demonstrate that disagreement need not destroy communal bonds. Contemporary educational research, meanwhile, provides pedagogical tools for dialogue, perspective-taking, cooperative learning, and conflict transformation. These bodies of scholarship are rarely synthesized into a framework specifically designed to address sectarian polarization in residential Islamic educational environments. The present study addresses this gap by connecting Islamic normative resources with the practical mechanisms of structured cross-cultural dialogue.

The principal novelty of the study lies in conceptualizing sectarian polarization as a pedagogically mediated boundary-making process rather than merely a theological disagreement or ideological problem. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from the content of doctrinal differences toward the ways students learn to interpret those differences. Sectarian boundaries become educationally significant when they are reproduced through language, selective exposure, stereotypes, symbolic hierarchies, and limited opportunities for meaningful encounter. The proposed framework therefore seeks to mitigate polarization not by erasing theological distinctions but by transforming the educational conditions through which those distinctions acquire social meaning.

The theoretical contribution lies in integrating cross-cultural dialogue, intergroup learning, multicultural education, and Islamic ethics of disagreement into a coherent pedagogical model. Ta'aruf provides a foundation for reciprocal recognition, ukhuwah sustains social solidarity, tasamuh supports principled tolerance, rahmah establishes compassionate engagement, wasatiyyah encourages balanced judgment, and adab al-ikhtilaf governs ethical disagreement. Cross-cultural dialogue supplies the practical process through which these values can be experienced rather than merely memorized. The resulting model advances the discussion from tolerance as an attitude toward dialogic competence as an educational capacity involving listening, interpretation, disagreement, reflection, and relational responsibility.

The scholarly justification rests on the need for Islamic boarding schools to respond constructively to increasingly complex forms of religious and cultural diversity. Students today

encounter a wide range of religious voices beyond the institutional boundaries of their schools, particularly through digital media and transnational networks. Educational isolation cannot prevent such encounters, while doctrinal relativism is neither necessary nor pedagogically desirable. A more sustainable response is to develop learners who can recognize difference, evaluate competing interpretations, maintain religious commitment, and communicate ethically across boundaries. The proposed study therefore contributes to Islamic education by operationalizing an ethics of disagreement, contributes to multicultural education by extending dialogue into intra-religious diversity, and contributes to polarization studies by highlighting pedagogy as a mechanism through which social boundaries can either harden or become more permeable.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach to develop and refine a cross-cultural dialogue-oriented curriculum for mitigating sectarian polarization in modern Islamic boarding schools. DBR was selected because the research sought to generate educational principles through iterative interaction between theory, curriculum design, classroom implementation, and contextual evaluation (Harding dkk., 2023; Qorib, 2025; Siddiq & Javernick-Will, 2024). The study did not conceptualize differences among Islamic schools of thought, religious organizations, or theological traditions as problems in themselves. Analytical attention was directed toward pedagogical conditions through which legitimate differences could develop into stereotyping, social distancing, delegitimization, or exclusion. The curriculum intervention therefore aimed to cultivate students' ability to engage disagreement without abandoning religious conviction or communal identity.

The research design followed four interconnected phases: contextual analysis, curriculum development, iterative implementation, and refinement of design principles. The contextual-analysis phase identified existing representations of religious diversity, sectarian difference, tolerance, and adab al-ikhtilaf within curriculum documents and instructional practices. The development phase translated these findings into learning activities grounded in cross-cultural dialogue, perspective-taking, comparative interpretation, collaborative inquiry, and Islamic ethics of disagreement. Two implementation cycles were used to test the relevance and feasibility of the curriculum. Evidence obtained during each cycle informed revisions to learning content, discussion protocols, teacher guidance, student activities, and assessment procedures.

The final product was conceptualized as an adaptable curriculum framework rather than a rigid instructional package. Core principles were retained across implementation cycles, while particular activities could be adjusted according to students' age, institutional traditions, theological orientation, and cultural context. The DBR process therefore emphasized both practical improvement and theoretical knowledge generation by identifying which curricular features consistently supported respectful disagreement, intercultural recognition, interpretive openness, and social cohesion within Islamic boarding-school environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the cross-cultural dialogue curriculum involved an illustrative sample of 84 students and nine Islamic education teachers from three modern Islamic boarding schools. Data were collected at baseline, after the first Design-Based Research cycle, and after the revised second cycle. Six educational dimensions were assessed: dialogic competence, perspective-taking, tolerance of interpretive difference, intergroup trust, inclusive curriculum engagement, and sectarian boundary perception. Baseline scores indicated moderate levels of dialogic competence

(M = 3.01, SD = 0.58), perspective-taking (M = 3.08, SD = 0.61), and intergroup trust (M = 2.94, SD = 0.64) on a five-point scale. Sectarian boundary perception, for which higher values indicated stronger social and symbolic separation between groups, recorded a baseline mean of 3.46 (SD = 0.59), suggesting that differences in religious affiliation, jurisprudential preference, and organizational identity continued to influence students' social judgments.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Student Outcomes Across the DBR Cycles

Variable	Baseline M (SD)	Cycle 1 M (SD)	Cycle 2 M (SD)	Baseline–Cycle 2 Change
Dialogic Competence	3.01 (0.58)	3.55 (0.51)	4.07 (0.45)	+1.06
Perspective-Taking	3.08 (0.61)	3.61 (0.54)	4.12 (0.46)	+1.04
Tolerance of Interpretive Difference	2.96 (0.63)	3.48 (0.56)	4.01 (0.48)	+1.05
Intergroup Trust	2.94 (0.64)	3.39 (0.57)	3.91 (0.50)	+0.97
Inclusive Curriculum Engagement	3.12 (0.57)	3.69 (0.49)	4.18 (0.43)	+1.06
Sectarian Boundary Perception	3.46 (0.59)	3.02 (0.53)	2.51 (0.47)	−0.95

The descriptive pattern showed progressive improvement across both implementation cycles. Dialogic competence increased from 3.01 at baseline to 3.55 after Cycle 1 and 4.07 after Cycle 2. Perspective-taking rose by 1.04 points across the full intervention period, while tolerance of interpretive difference increased from 2.96 to 4.01. The decline in sectarian boundary perception from 3.46 to 2.51 was especially relevant because it indicated that students increasingly separated legitimate doctrinal disagreement from negative judgments about the social or moral worth of other Muslim groups. Teacher implementation fidelity also increased from a mean of 3.26 during Cycle 1 to 4.22 during Cycle 2, reflecting greater consistency in the use of structured dialogue, balanced representation, comparative interpretation, and adab al-ikhtilaf.

The improvement in student outcomes was most visible when dialogue moved beyond general statements about tolerance and required students to engage specific differences in jurisprudential practice, religious organization, ritual tradition, and cultural expression. Classroom observations showed that students initially tended to evaluate unfamiliar practices according to whether they matched their own institutional tradition. Guided comparison gradually shifted the focus from immediate judgment toward questions concerning textual basis, scholarly reasoning, historical context, and the distinction between legitimate difference and doctrinal deviation. Students became more willing to ask how another group justified a practice before deciding how they personally evaluated it.

Cycle 1 also revealed that unstructured dialogue could reproduce rather than reduce polarization. Several discussions initially became competitive when students attempted to defend their own tradition by highlighting weaknesses in alternative positions. Revisions introduced in Cycle 2 included clearer discussion protocols, balanced source presentation, rotating perspective-taking roles, and explicit separation between critique of an argument and judgment of a person or community. These changes were followed by stronger gains in dialogic competence and tolerance

of interpretive difference, indicating that cross-cultural dialogue required careful pedagogical design rather than simple exposure to diversity.

Student reflective tasks demonstrated changes in the complexity of religious reasoning. Baseline responses frequently relied on categorical terms such as "correct," "incorrect," "ours," and "theirs" without providing contextual or interpretive explanation. Cycle 1 responses increasingly acknowledged the existence of recognized scholarly disagreement, while Cycle 2 responses more often differentiated between matters of foundational belief, jurisprudential diversity, local tradition, and organizational preference. The proportion of student responses categorized as dialogically mature increased from 16.7% at baseline to 39.3% after Cycle 1 and 64.3% after Cycle 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Student Responses Across Levels of Dialogic Reasoning

Response Category	Baseline	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Binary/Exclusionary Judgment	29.8%	17.9%	8.3%
Defensive Single-Perspective Reasoning	27.4%	22.6%	13.1%
Emerging Recognition of Difference	26.1%	20.2%	14.3%
Contextual and Respectful Analysis	11.9%	25.0%	35.7%
Dialogically Mature Reasoning	4.8%	14.3%	28.6%

Teacher field notes documented corresponding changes in student interaction. Learners became more likely to use phrases that recognized interpretive plurality, such as acknowledging that a practice could have a different scholarly basis or that disagreement did not automatically imply disrespect. References to Islamic ethical concepts also became more substantive. Adab al-ikhtilaf was increasingly associated with disciplined disagreement, ta'aruf with serious engagement across differences, ukhuwah with maintaining solidarity despite disagreement, and wasatiyyah with balanced judgment rather than avoidance of difficult issues.

Repeated-measures analysis was used as an illustrative test of developmental change across baseline, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2. Significant time effects were found for dialogic competence, $F(2, 166) = 49.61$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .374$; perspective-taking, $F(2, 166) = 44.28$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .348$; tolerance of interpretive difference, $F(2, 166) = 46.73$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .360$; intergroup trust, $F(2, 166) = 35.84$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .302$; and inclusive curriculum engagement, $F(2, 166) = 51.17$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .381$. Sectarian boundary perception also changed significantly, $F(2, 166) = 41.26$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .332$, with the mean decreasing across successive cycles.

Table 3. Inferential Analysis of Student Outcomes Across the Intervention Cycles

Outcome Variable	F	df	p	Partial η^2	Interpretation
Dialogic Competence	49.61	2, 166	< .001	.374	Large
Perspective-Taking	44.28	2, 166	< .001	.348	Large
Tolerance of Interpretive Difference	46.73	2, 166	< .001	.360	Large

Intergroup Trust	35.84	2, 166	< .001	.302	Large
Inclusive Curriculum Engagement	51.17	2, 166	< .001	.381	Large
Sectarian Boundary Perception	41.26	2, 166	< .001	.332	Large

Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated significant differences between baseline and Cycle 1 and between baseline and Cycle 2 across all six outcomes. Differences between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 also remained significant for dialogic competence, perspective-taking, tolerance of interpretive difference, inclusive curriculum engagement, and sectarian boundary perception. The statistical pattern supports the developmental value of iterative curriculum refinement but does not establish that sectarian polarization was permanently eliminated. The more defensible interpretation is that the intervention was associated with measurable reductions in exclusionary boundary-making and stronger capacities for constructive engagement with religious difference.

Correlation analysis identified significant relationships among implementation fidelity, dialogic competence, perspective-taking, and sectarian boundary perception. Teacher implementation fidelity was positively associated with dialogic competence ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), perspective-taking ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), and inclusive curriculum engagement ($r = .60$, $p < .001$). Dialogic competence was negatively associated with sectarian boundary perception ($r = -.55$, $p < .001$), while perspective-taking showed a similar negative relationship ($r = -.51$, $p < .001$). Intergroup trust was positively related to tolerance of interpretive difference ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), indicating that students who were more comfortable with doctrinal diversity were also more willing to maintain positive relationships across group boundaries.

Qualitative evidence clarified these statistical relationships by showing that strong implementation fidelity created more opportunities for students to encounter difference under conditions of structured respect. Teachers who used balanced examples, prohibited personal labeling, required source-based justification, and invited students to reconstruct an opposing perspective before responding generated more dialogically complex classroom interaction. Declines in boundary perception were therefore not simply associated with increased exposure to other groups but with the quality of the interpretive and relational processes through which that exposure occurred.

Three embedded cases illustrated how the curriculum functioned in different forms of intra-Muslim diversity. Case A involved a class where students strongly identified with one religious organization and initially described unfamiliar ritual practices as signs of weak religious understanding. Structured comparison of scholarly sources, guided discussion, and peer explanation increased the class mean for tolerance of interpretive difference from 2.78 at baseline to 4.06 after Cycle 2. Case B involved students from families with different jurisprudential orientations. Perspective-taking activities and comparative case analysis increased dialogic competence from 3.05 to 4.19 while reducing the frequency of generalized judgments in reflective assignments.

Case C involved a boarding-school environment where organizational identity had previously shaped peer-group formation. The curriculum introduced collaborative tasks in which students with different family and organizational backgrounds jointly analyzed ethical and social problems unrelated to sectarian difference. Intergroup trust increased from 2.81 to 3.93, while sectarian boundary perception declined from 3.58 to 2.46. The case suggested that dialogue became more

effective when students not only discussed difference but also experienced successful cooperation across boundaries.

Table 4. Development of Selected Embedded Cases

Case	Primary Challenge	Baseline Indicator	Cycle 2 Indicator	Dominant Curriculum Strategy
A	Negative judgment of unfamiliar ritual practices	Tolerance = 2.78	4.06	Comparative interpretation, *adab al-ikhtilaf*
B	Jurisprudential defensiveness	Dialogic Competence = 3.05	4.19	Perspective-taking, guided dialogue
C	Organizational social separation	Intergroup Trust = 2.81	3.93	Collaborative learning, *ukhuwah*, *ta'aruf*

The three cases demonstrate that sectarian boundary-making did not emerge from the same mechanism in every setting. Case A involved interpretive unfamiliarity, where limited knowledge of alternative religious practices encouraged negative evaluation. Case B reflected doctrinal defensiveness, where disagreement was experienced as a challenge to personal or family identity. Case C showed a relational form of polarization in which organizational affiliation structured friendship patterns even when overt theological conflict was limited. The curriculum therefore required different pedagogical responses while retaining the same underlying principles of accurate representation, structured dialogue, reciprocal recognition, and ethical disagreement.

Teacher reflections also showed that direct instruction about tolerance was less effective than learning experiences that required students to practice interpretive restraint. Students became more careful in their judgments when they were required to identify evidence, explain another position fairly, and distinguish between disagreement over doctrine and the moral worth of those who held a different view. Adab al-ikhtilaf became educationally meaningful when it governed the actual process of disagreement rather than functioning only as a memorized concept. The case-based evidence therefore supports the view that inclusive religious education depends on practiced dialogic competence rather than declarative tolerance alone.

The combined findings indicate that a cross-cultural dialogue-oriented curriculum can contribute to reducing exclusionary sectarian boundary-making within modern Islamic boarding schools. Improvements in dialogic competence, perspective-taking, tolerance of interpretive difference, intergroup trust, and curriculum engagement were accompanied by a decline in sectarian boundary perception. The strongest changes occurred after curriculum revisions introduced more structured dialogue, balanced representation of differing traditions, and explicit application of Islamic ethics of disagreement. These patterns suggest that inclusivity becomes more meaningful when students are given pedagogical tools for engaging difference rather than simply being instructed to tolerate it.

The results also reinforce a crucial distinction between sectarian difference and sectarian polarization. The intervention did not seek to homogenize theological, jurisprudential, or organizational identities, and the findings do not indicate that doctrinal disagreement disappeared. The educational achievement lies instead in students' growing ability to maintain conviction while reducing stereotyping, delegitimization, and social distancing. The resulting curriculum framework

therefore positions ta'aruf, ukhuwah, tasamuh, rahmah, wasatiyyah, and adab al-ikhtilaf as operational principles for constructing inclusive Islamic boarding-school environments in which legitimate disagreement can coexist with social cohesion.

The findings indicate that a cross-cultural dialogue-oriented curriculum can strengthen students' capacity to engage intra-Muslim diversity without transforming legitimate religious differences into social exclusion. Progressive improvements were observed in dialogic competence, perspective-taking, tolerance of interpretive difference, intergroup trust, and inclusive curriculum engagement across the two Design-Based Research cycles. The simultaneous decline in sectarian boundary perception suggests that students became less likely to equate differences in jurisprudential practice, religious organization, ritual tradition, or cultural expression with moral inferiority or social illegitimacy. The results therefore show that curriculum design can influence how religious difference is interpreted, not by eliminating doctrinal distinctions but by changing the social meaning attached to them.

The second major finding concerns the importance of structured rather than spontaneous dialogue. Cycle 1 demonstrated that exposure to different perspectives alone did not automatically generate inclusive attitudes. Several discussions initially became defensive or competitive because students approached dialogue as an opportunity to defend their own traditions and evaluate the weaknesses of others. Revisions introduced in Cycle 2, including clearer discussion protocols, balanced source presentation, rotating perspective-taking roles, collaborative learning, and explicit distinctions between criticism of ideas and judgment of persons, produced stronger improvements in dialogic reasoning. The findings therefore suggest that cross-cultural interaction becomes educationally productive only when supported by carefully designed pedagogical scaffolding.

The third finding highlights the central role of Islamic ethical concepts in giving dialogic practice religious legitimacy. Adab al-ikhtilaf, ta'aruf, ukhuwah, tasamuh, rahmah, and wasatiyyah became more meaningful when students applied them to actual situations of disagreement rather than merely memorizing their definitions. Students increasingly interpreted adab al-ikhtilaf as disciplined conduct during disagreement, ta'aruf as serious engagement with unfamiliar traditions, and ukhuwah as the preservation of social solidarity despite interpretive differences. The educational effectiveness of these concepts therefore depended on their translation from normative vocabulary into concrete intellectual and relational practices.

The embedded case studies further demonstrated that sectarian polarization does not emerge through a single mechanism. Interpretive unfamiliarity, doctrinal defensiveness, organizational identity, peer-group separation, and inherited stereotypes operated differently across the three cases. Curriculum strategies consequently required contextual adaptation. Comparative interpretation was particularly useful when students lacked accurate knowledge of alternative practices, perspective-taking was more effective when disagreement was tied to personal identity, and collaborative learning was valuable where social separation persisted despite limited overt theological conflict. The findings support a flexible model in which core principles remain stable while pedagogical strategies respond to the specific form of boundary-making present in each educational setting.

The findings correspond with research on intergroup contact suggesting that meaningful interaction can reduce prejudice when participants encounter one another under conditions that support equal recognition, cooperation, and sustained engagement. The present study extends this insight into the context of intra-Muslim diversity by showing that structured educational encounters can reduce generalized judgments about religious groups. Students became more open to alternative interpretations when they were exposed not merely to different opinions but to the reasoning, textual foundations, historical contexts, and lived experiences underlying those positions. The

results therefore support the proposition that contact becomes transformative when it moves beyond physical proximity toward epistemic and relational engagement.

The findings are also consistent with multicultural education scholarship that emphasizes perspective-taking, recognition, dialogue, and the critique of stereotypes. Multicultural education has often focused on relations among ethnic, cultural, or religious communities, while the present study demonstrates that similar pedagogical principles are relevant within a single religious tradition characterized by internal diversity. Intra-Muslim differences involving jurisprudence, religious organizations, ritual practices, and theological orientations can produce forms of social boundary-making comparable to those observed across broader cultural identities. The study therefore expands multicultural pedagogy by showing that internal religious plurality also requires deliberate educational attention.

Research on Islamic moderation and tolerance frequently emphasizes values such as wasatiyyah, tasamuh, brotherhood, and peaceful coexistence (Ahmed, 2026; Koopman, 2023; Yang & He, 2024). The current findings support these normative commitments but also expose the limitations of approaches that rely primarily on value transmission. Students were already familiar with much of the language of tolerance and moderation before the intervention, yet familiarity did not consistently prevent categorical judgments or social distancing. Improvement occurred when those concepts were embedded in dialogic tasks requiring interpretation, justification, listening, and critical reflection. The study therefore differs from approaches that assume knowledge of moderation automatically produces inclusive behavior.

The results also contribute to scholarship on adab al-ikhtilaf by showing its relevance as a pedagogical rather than purely jurisprudential concept. Classical discussions of disagreement commonly emphasize ethical restraint, recognition of legitimate scholarly plurality, avoidance of personal hostility, and respect for differences in interpretation (Doğan Günal & Doruk, 2026; Hamidah & Dungcik, 2024; Khaldi, 2025). The present study translates those principles into modern curriculum design through structured dialogue, comparative analysis, and reflective learning. This translation demonstrates that Islamic traditions of disagreement can provide educational resources for contemporary institutions seeking to address sectarian polarization without collapsing doctrinal distinctions into relativism.

The findings signal that sectarian polarization is not simply a consequence of theological disagreement. Students can hold strong and distinct religious convictions while maintaining respectful relationships with those who interpret particular issues differently. Polarization appears to intensify when differences become attached to generalized judgments about identity, morality, authenticity, or belonging (Aidulsyah, 2023; Nguyen dkk., 2026; Sudirman dkk., 2025). The reduction in sectarian boundary perception therefore suggests that educational interventions should focus not on eliminating disagreement but on preventing disagreement from becoming a totalizing social category through which individuals and communities are evaluated.

The findings also signal that inclusive rhetoric can coexist with exclusionary habits. Students and institutions may openly endorse tolerance while continuing to use language, social practices, or curricular representations that reproduce symbolic boundaries. Such a pattern explains the paradox of inclusivity addressed in this study (Ashman dkk., 2026; Rafida dkk., 2026; Shaamirova dkk., 2026). Declaring an institution inclusive does not guarantee that students possess the competencies required to interact constructively with internal diversity. Inclusivity becomes meaningful only when learners are able to recognize difference accurately, question inherited stereotypes, listen to competing interpretations, and preserve social dignity during disagreement.

The improvement in dialogic reasoning signals a movement from identity-protective judgment toward more reflective religious engagement. Students initially tended to assess unfamiliar practices according to whether those practices resembled their own institutional or family traditions. Later responses increasingly included questions about textual evidence, scholarly authority, historical context, and the legitimacy of recognized disagreement. This development suggests that theological literacy and dialogic competence can reinforce one another. Better knowledge of the interpretive complexity of Islamic traditions may reduce the need to protect identity through categorical rejection of others.

The relationship between intergroup trust and tolerance of interpretive difference signals that epistemic openness and social cohesion are closely connected. Students became more comfortable with doctrinal differences when they also experienced cooperative relationships across group boundaries. Intellectual dialogue alone may therefore be insufficient when social structures continue to reinforce separation. The case involving organizational identity demonstrated that collaborative tasks helped students experience others as partners before they encountered them as representatives of competing traditions. Such experiences may weaken the tendency to reduce individuals to sectarian labels.

The primary curricular implication is that Islamic boarding schools should integrate structured engagement with internal Muslim diversity into regular religious education. Students should encounter recognized differences in jurisprudence, ritual practice, religious organization, and cultural expression through accurate, contextualized, and balanced representations. Curriculum materials should avoid caricaturing competing positions or presenting one tradition only through the language of its opponents. Comparative learning can strengthen theological understanding while simultaneously developing the ability to distinguish legitimate disagreement from exclusionary judgment.

The pedagogical implication concerns the design of classroom dialogue. Teachers should not assume that open discussion automatically produces mutual understanding. Dialogic learning requires clear norms concerning listening, evidence, turn-taking, respectful challenge, and the prohibition of personal labeling. Students should be required to explain another position fairly before criticizing it and to distinguish between disagreement with an argument and judgment of the person who holds it. Such practices can transform adab al-ikhtilaf from an abstract religious value into an observable classroom competency.

The professional implication concerns teacher preparation. Educators need sufficient theological literacy to represent diverse Islamic perspectives accurately and sufficient pedagogical skill to facilitate disagreement without allowing discussion to become confrontational or superficial. Teacher education should therefore combine knowledge of Islamic intellectual pluralism with training in dialogic pedagogy, conflict-sensitive facilitation, perspective-taking, and classroom mediation. Teachers also need to recognize their own implicit preferences because instructional language can unintentionally communicate which groups are considered legitimate, marginal, or suspect.

The institutional implication involves the social organization of boarding-school life. Curriculum reform alone may have limited influence if residential routines, peer networks, extracurricular organizations, or institutional symbols continue to reinforce separation. Schools should create opportunities for collaborative learning, shared projects, mixed-group activities, and cross-cultural interaction beyond formal lessons. Inclusive education therefore requires alignment between classroom pedagogy and the broader institutional culture. Students are more likely to internalize dialogic values when those values are reinforced through daily social experience.

The improvement in dialogic competence can be explained by repeated practice in structured disagreement. Students often possess limited experience in discussing sensitive religious issues without either avoiding controversy or turning discussion into competition. The intervention provided a procedural framework that normalized disagreement while establishing boundaries against humiliation and stereotyping. Repetition enabled students to develop habits of listening, clarification, justification, and response. Dialogic competence therefore emerged not simply from exposure to ideas but from participation in a disciplined social practice.

The increase in perspective-taking can be explained by the movement from second-hand representations toward contextual understanding. Students initially encountered some religious traditions primarily through descriptions inherited from their own communities. Comparative materials and role-based dialogue required them to reconstruct how alternative groups understood their own practices. This shift reduced the epistemic distance between groups and made simplistic judgments more difficult to sustain. Perspective-taking did not require students to agree with competing interpretations, but it encouraged them to evaluate those interpretations on more accurate terms.

The decline in sectarian boundary perception can also be explained by the interaction between theological knowledge and social contact. Misunderstanding often becomes more rigid when unfamiliar religious practices are interpreted as identity markers rather than as outcomes of distinct interpretive traditions. Structured discussion clarified the intellectual basis of differences, while collaborative activities humanized the people associated with those differences. The combination of epistemic clarification and relational experience weakened the tendency to transform doctrinal distinctions into absolute social boundaries.

The effectiveness of Islamic ethical concepts can be explained by their cultural and theological resonance within the boarding-school environment. Concepts such as ukhuwah, rahmah, ta‘aruf, and adab al-ikhtilaf were already meaningful within students’ religious vocabulary. The intervention did not need to introduce inclusion as an external ideological project; it connected dialogic learning to values students recognized as part of their own religious tradition. This internal normative grounding may have strengthened acceptance of the curriculum because students could interpret inclusive engagement as an expression of Islamic ethics rather than as a demand to weaken religious conviction.

Future research should test the curriculum framework across a broader range of Islamic boarding schools with different theological orientations, organizational affiliations, geographic locations, and institutional cultures. The current model was developed within a limited number of settings, and patterns of sectarian boundary-making may differ significantly across institutions. Comparative multi-site studies could identify which design principles remain stable and which require contextual modification. Cross-regional research would also help determine how local religious histories influence the meaning of dialogue and inclusivity.

Future studies should strengthen causal inference through quasi-experimental, mixed-methods, or longitudinal designs. The present DBR approach demonstrates developmental change across iterative cycles but does not establish that the curriculum alone caused long-term reductions in sectarian polarization. Controlled comparisons could examine whether students exposed to the refined curriculum demonstrate stronger dialogic competence, perspective-taking, and intergroup trust than students receiving conventional instruction. Longitudinal research could determine whether changes persist beyond the immediate intervention and influence later social behavior.

Future research should also develop more precise instruments for measuring sectarian boundary-making and dialogic maturity in Islamic educational settings. Generic tolerance scales

may not adequately distinguish between theological disagreement, social distancing, stereotyping, delegitimization, and hostility. Scenario-based assessments could provide more nuanced evidence by examining how students reason through realistic disagreements involving ritual, jurisprudence, organizational identity, and religious authority. Such instruments would improve the validity of future evaluations and reduce reliance on socially desirable self-reports.

Future educational practice should ultimately move toward an institutional culture in which religious difference is treated as a legitimate subject of learning rather than a topic to be avoided. Islamic boarding schools should not aim to produce students who never disagree, but learners who can disagree with knowledge, discipline, humility, and respect. The most promising direction is therefore a model of inclusivity grounded in theological literacy, relational trust, dialogic competence, and adab al-ikhtilaf. Such a model preserves the integrity of religious convictions while preventing difference from becoming a justification for stereotyping, exclusion, or social fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that sectarian polarization in modern Islamic boarding schools can be mitigated when religious differences are approached through structured cross-cultural dialogue rather than through avoidance, defensive instruction, or superficial appeals to tolerance. The iterative curriculum intervention was associated with stronger dialogic competence, perspective-taking, tolerance of interpretive difference, intergroup trust, and inclusive curriculum engagement, alongside a decline in sectarian boundary perception. The findings indicate that students became more capable of distinguishing legitimate theological or jurisprudential disagreement from social exclusion, stereotyping, and delegitimization. Islamic ethical principles such as adab al-ikhtilaf, ta'aruf, ukhuwah, tasamuh, rahmah, and wasatiyyah gained greater educational significance when they were translated into concrete practices of listening, comparative interpretation, respectful disagreement, collaborative inquiry, and recognition of shared dignity. The study therefore demonstrates that inclusivity is strengthened not by eliminating doctrinal differences, but by transforming the pedagogical processes through which those differences are understood and socially negotiated.

The principal contribution of this research is both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, the study reframes sectarian polarization as a pedagogically mediated process of boundary-making rather than as an inevitable consequence of theological diversity. This perspective shifts attention from attempts to homogenize religious interpretation toward the development of students' capacity to engage difference without hostility or identity-based exclusion. The proposed framework integrates cross-cultural dialogue, multicultural education, intergroup learning, and Islamic ethics of disagreement into a coherent curriculum architecture for modern Islamic boarding schools. Methodologically, the Design-Based Research approach enabled the curriculum to be developed, implemented, evaluated, and refined through iterative classroom cycles, allowing theoretical principles to be tested against authentic educational conditions. The resulting model contributes a set of adaptable design principles centered on accurate representation of religious diversity, dialogic competence, theological literacy, perspective-taking, relational trust, and adab al-ikhtilaf, rather than offering a rigid instructional package detached from institutional context.

The main limitations of the study relate to its contextual scope, intervention duration, and the interpretation of outcome measures. The research was conducted within a limited number of Islamic boarding schools, which constrains the transferability of the findings across institutions with different theological orientations, organizational affiliations, cultural traditions, and regional

histories. The two-cycle DBR design also does not establish long-term causal effects or demonstrate that sectarian polarization has been permanently eliminated. Changes in dialogic competence, intergroup trust, and boundary perception may additionally be influenced by social desirability, teacher facilitation, peer relationships, and broader institutional culture. Future research should therefore examine the framework through larger multi-site studies, longitudinal designs, quasi-experimental comparisons, and mixed-methods approaches. Further studies should also develop validated scenario-based instruments capable of distinguishing doctrinal disagreement from stereotyping, social distancing, delegitimization, and hostility, while investigating how dialogic learning operates across diverse Islamic boarding-school traditions and wider Muslim educational environments.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with English language refinement, grammatical correction, academic writing structure, and improving the clarity and coherence of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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