

# Leveraging Religious Capital: Teacher Agency and Curriculum Reform in Indonesian Islamic Schools

Eka Rizki Amalia

Curtin University, Australia; [EkaRizki.Amalia@student.curtin.edu.au](mailto:EkaRizki.Amalia@student.curtin.edu.au)

Universitas KH Abdul Chalim, Mojokerto, Indonesia

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Cultural Capital;  
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Islamic Schools;  
Religious Capital;  
Teacher Agency

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## Abstract

Curriculum transformation in Indonesian Islamic educational institutions (madrasahs) is essential in addressing globalization challenges and technology development. This research investigates the intersection of religious capital and teacher agency in these institutions, with the objective of understanding how Islamic values can shape curricular innovation without abandoning core Islamic educational principles. Systematic library-based research was employed to select the literature published in peer-reviewed publications from 2015 to the present using the following databases: Scopus, ERIC, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest and ScienceDirect with the keywords listed to be included were, "curriculum reform," "Islamic schools," "religious capital," and "teacher agency." The results show how teachers draw on religious capital—expertise of religious text, the practice of religion, and community networks—to articulate curriculum changes in ways centering on Islamic values. The study highlights how religious capital can both enable teachers and constrain innovations. The findings offer practical implications: Policymakers must recognize religious capital's nuanced role in curriculum reform, ensuring that educational institutions meet pedagogical needs not at the expense of religious education's integrity. This interaction in the context of a wider Islamic educational setting should be unpacked in future research in order to extrapolate implications for sustainable and inclusive educational policies.

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## Kata kunci:

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Reformasi  
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## Abstrak

*Transformasi kurikulum di lembaga pendidikan Islam di Indonesia (madrasah) sangat penting untuk menghadapi tantangan globalisasi dan perkembangan teknologi. Penelitian ini menyelidiki keterkaitan antara modal religius dan agensi guru di lembaga-lembaga tersebut, dengan tujuan untuk memahami bagaimana nilai-nilai Islam dapat membentuk inovasi kurikulum tanpa meninggalkan prinsip-prinsip dasar pendidikan Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi pustaka secara sistematis untuk memilih literatur yang diterbitkan dalam publikasi terakreditasi dan ditinjau sejawat dari tahun 2015 hingga sekarang. Basis data yang digunakan meliputi: Scopus, ERIC, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, dan ScienceDirect. Kata kunci yang digunakan dalam pencarian adalah: "curriculum reform," "Islamic schools," "religious capital," dan "teacher agency." Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa para guru memanfaatkan modal religius—keahlian dalam teks keagamaan, praktik keberagamaan, dan jaringan komunitas—untuk merumuskan perubahan kurikulum yang berpusat pada nilai-nilai Islam. Studi ini menyoroti bahwa modal religius dapat sekaligus menjadi faktor pendukung maupun pembatas dalam inovasi. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi praktis: Para pembuat kebijakan harus mengakui peran kompleks modal religius dalam reformasi kurikulum, guna memastikan bahwa kebutuhan pedagogis dapat terpenuhi tanpa mengorbankan integritas pendidikan agama. Interaksi ini, dalam konteks pendidikan Islam yang lebih luas, perlu dikaji lebih lanjut agar dapat menghasilkan kebijakan pendidikan yang berkelanjutan dan inklusif.*

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Corresponding Author:

Eka Rizki Amalia

Universitas KH Abdul Chalim, Mojokerto, Indonesia; [EkaRizki.Amalia@student.curtin.edu.au](mailto:EkaRizki.Amalia@student.curtin.edu.au)

[ekarizkiamalia2104@gmail.com](mailto:ekarizkiamalia2104@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Islamic schools (madrasahs), especially at the senior high school level, offer a unique educational model that blends the national curriculum with Islamic religious instruction. In a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, this dual approach is central to forming individuals who are not only intellectually competent but also morally grounded (Anwar & Ali, 2021; Osmonova, 2024; Yahyani et al., 2020). These institutions act as both educational and moral anchors, reflecting the country's longstanding religious traditions and the socio-cultural significance of Islam in everyday life (Hayadin et al., 2019). As such, Islamic schools play a crucial role in preparing students to contribute meaningfully to society while maintaining their religious identity. However, madrasahs today are increasingly required to respond to national and global pressures to modernize, particularly through curriculum reform. The introduction of Indonesia's new curriculum, the *Merdeka Curriculum*, along with broader global shifts—such as digitalization, labor market transformation, and international accountability metrics—has placed new demands on these schools (Afgani, 2025; Setyaningsih et al., 2025). These reforms aim to cultivate 21st-century competencies, encourage learner-centered pedagogies, and reduce dependence on rigid standardization (Husni et al., 2023; Suherman et al., 2021).

In this reform context, teachers are not merely implementers of external policy but active agents whose decisions and practices significantly shape the direction of change. In Islamic schools, teachers occupy a unique position at the intersection of state expectations, institutional norms, and community values. They are not only professional educators but also religious figures who wield moral and spiritual authority (Zulfikar, 2018). This makes teacher agency—understood as the capacity to act purposefully and transformative—a central mechanism through which curricular reform is negotiated. Yet, while teacher agency has gained attention in both international and Indonesian contexts, few studies have examined the specific conditions that enable or constrain such agency within religious schools. In particular, there is limited understanding of how Islamic teachers draw on religious values not just as content to be taught but as cultural and symbolic resources that shape their engagement with change.

This study addresses that gap by introducing the concept of religious capital—a form of cultural capital comprising religious knowledge, symbolic legitimacy, ritual authority, and embedded social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Sullivan, 2001; Verter, 2003). The central argument of this paper is that religious capital plays a dual role in shaping teacher agency in Islamic schools. On one hand, it equips teachers with the legitimacy and authority to align curricular reforms with Islamic values, thus making innovation appear religiously acceptable. On the other hand, religious capital can also act as a constraining force when it reinforces traditionalist views or discourages pedagogical experimentation that might be seen as contrary to established doctrine (Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2018; Tucker & Powell, 2021). Through this theoretical lens,

the study explores how teachers actively mobilize or resist religious capital in ways that influence the reform process.

Although previous research has explored the dilemmas faced by teachers in Islamic educational settings—such as the tension between modern pedagogies and religious teachings (Ibrahim, 2019; Indraswati et al., 2021; Jaenullah et al., 2022)—and the policy-level challenges of curriculum reform (Halai & Durrani, 2017; Halim, 2023; Mahdali et al., 2022), few have interrogated how religious capital operates within the micro-politics of teacher decision-making. This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of teachers in Indonesian madrasahs as they navigate the complexities of reform. The purpose of this study, therefore, is not simply to document obstacles or achievements in curriculum change, but to analyze how teachers' use of religious capital mediates their capacity to enact and sustain educational innovation. In doing so, this research offers a nuanced perspective on how Islamic schools might remain authentically religious while participating in the broader agenda of educational modernization.

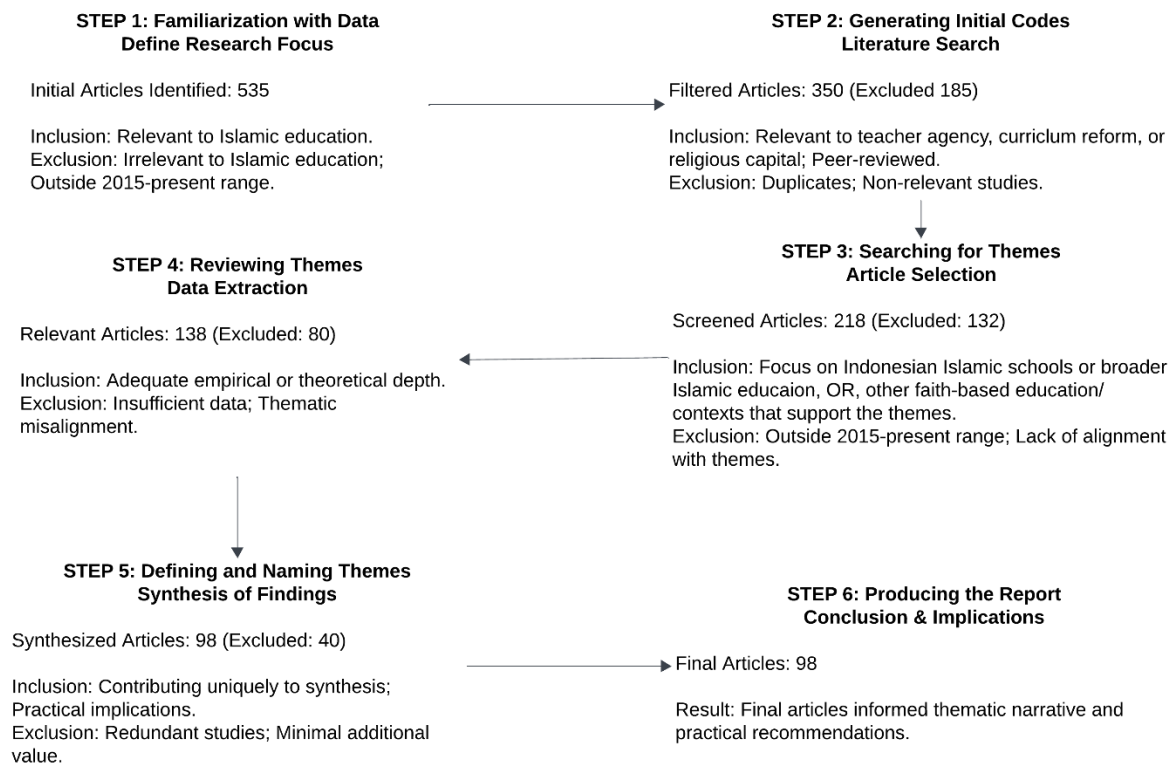
## **METHOD**

The library-based research approach is particularly well-suited for this study of the role of religious capital in shaping teacher agency and curriculum reform in Indonesian Islamic schools. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of existing theories, empirical findings, and scholarly perspectives on the complex interplay between religious capital, teacher agency, and curriculum reform. As the central concepts in this study—religious capital and teacher agency—are predominantly theoretical and conceptual, engaging with the existing literature enables a comprehensive exploration of how Bourdieu's ideas, particularly those related to capital, can be applied to Islamic educational contexts.

A literature-based analysis provides several advantages for this study. First, the nature of religious capital as it pertains to teacher agency and curriculum reform is predominantly theoretical, rather than empirical (Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2018; Tucker & Powell, 2021). Second, curriculum reform and religious capital are topics that have been widely discussed in academic literature, offering an opportunity to engage with diverse viewpoints (Halim, 2023; Ibrahim, 2019; Zulfikar, 2018). Third, a literature-based approach is ideal due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. The intersection of education, sociology, and religious studies provides a wealth of diverse sources that enrich the study (Halai & Durrani, 2017; Rahman et al., 2022). Bourdieu's concepts of capital, particularly cultural capital in the form of religious capital, serve as the foundation for this analysis. For instance, capital is used to understand the various resources that teachers leverage to influence educational practices, including religious knowledge and networks (Gamal, 2020; Sullivan, 2001; Yakavets et al., 2022).

The literature was selected based on a comprehensive search of academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect. Selection criteria included articles within the year range

of 2015 onwards, which is critical for extricating the study findings, especially the current reform process of curriculum and teacher practices in particular frames of Islamic education. This time frame mirrors the changing nature of education systems and their ability to adapt to changes taking place from world to local (Dano, 2024; Schleicher, 2018). Studies on teacher agency, curriculum reform, religious capital in the context of Islamic education were included in the selection criteria of the article. Priority was given to published articles of proper peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings or other respected academic sources. Prioritization was given to studies that focused specifically on Indonesian Islamic schools, but wider studies on Islamic education were included as long as they contained relevant findings. In contrast, studies excluded were those that did not engage with the central themes (teacher agency or curriculum reform), those that did not fall within the year range (2015 to present), or those that focused on non-Islamic educational context, with no relevance to religious capital. In addition, keywords such as "Religious Capital", "Teacher Agency", "Curriculum Reform", "Islamic Education", "Indonesian Islamic Schools", "Cultural Capital", and "Teacher Empowerment" were deliberately selected to lead the search for related articles. These were chosen because the keywords were intended to find theoretical and empirical studies on the intersection of religious capital and teacher agency as they pertain to curriculum reform.



**Figure 1.** Flowchart of the data collection and analysis, corroborated with the Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2012)

The research was conducted in a systematic flow. The first section of the paper on Islamic schools discusses three concepts: religious capital, teacher agency, and curriculum reform. We performed a comprehensive literature search from the defined keywords in the selected databases. The articles were screened and filtered using inclusion and exclusion criteria. The relevant data were extracted and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes that linked the concepts of religious capital and teacher agency to curriculum reform. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2012) was employed to examine how these themes manifested in different contexts, focusing on their implications for Islamic education in Indonesia. Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework as a guide, relevant data were extracted and synthesized to appreciate the interrelationship of the identified themes. The results were then synthesized to show the implications of education practice and policy in Indonesian Islamic schools, finally leading to conclusions and propositions for future research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

#### *Religious Capital and Teacher Agency: Empowerment in Curriculum Reforms*

Religious capital contributes to the enhancement of teacher agency, especially as they seek to align Islamic school curricula with religious and national education standards. Teachers with significant religious capital—including familiarity with religious texts, engagement in religious practices, and connections within the faith community—can more effectively push for curricular reforms that align with Islamic principles. Teachers leverage this religious capital to engage and shape the larger educational reforms. This is supported by a number of studies (Donnell & Gettinger, 2015; Hossain & Fatema, 2022; Saeed, 2022; Tindowen, 2019), arguing that teachers who feel able to act will advocate for adaptations to a curriculum that reflects their values and meet needs of their students. In religious educational contexts, the inclusion of Islamic values within the curriculum is especially important in order to create a well-rounded educational experience (Hadar & Benish-Weisman, 2018; Kasmawati et al., 2023). In addition, teachers working in Islamic educational contexts often try to utilize their religious knowledge and beliefs to initiate curricular changes that meet the requirements of religious (Islamic) principles while also being compatible with their educational philosophy (Ashraf et al., 2021; Gamal, 2020).

In Indonesian Islamic Schools, amid modern educational pressures against demands for a religious education, teachers rely on their religious capital to manage reforms. Teachers in Indonesian Islamic schools draw on their deep knowledge of religious texts to introduce Islamic moral education into wider curriculum reform efforts (Azra, 2015; Hamami & Nuryana, 2022; Rahman et al., 2019). This fosters a holistic approach to education, establishing the foundation of academic abilities and moral ideals. Therefore, teachers exercise their power in leading the reforms, making

sure that Islamic value preservation remains at the center of what they do but pressured for modernization.

Teachers' empowerment through religious capital is vital, as they often serve as key figures in promoting reforms that balance Islamic teachings with modern educational practices. This balance is particularly important in a context like Indonesia, where the pressure to modernize education must be carefully weighed against the need to preserve religious values (Rahman et al., 2019). Teacher agency is, therefore, not just about adapting to changes but about actively shaping how those changes unfold, ensuring that religious values are not marginalized.

### ***Resistance to Secularization***

Although religious capital provides a resource for teachers to advocate for changes, it has also created resistance to reforms seen as secularization or contradictions with Islamic belief. Resistance is another aspect of teacher agency, where teachers actively decide to exercise their autonomy and their religious beliefs in opposition to reforms that undermine the religious integrity of the school. Teachers endowed with strong religious capital tend to oppose curriculum reforms that favor or include secular knowledge that contradicts Islamic values (Akrim et al., 2022; Halim et al., 2023; Nurhayati & Andriani, 2021). If religious capital creates scope for teachers to advocate for changes, religious capital can also provide the means for resistance to changes that are perceived to be secularizing or lack compatibility with Islamic teachings. This pushback is also related to teacher agency: where teachers actively wield their independence and faith to resist changes perceived to threaten the religious character of the school. High religious capital teachers tend to resist curriculum reforms that replace Islamic knowledge with secular knowledge or introduce content that contradicts Islamic values (Alkouatli, 2018; Ayub et al., 2020; Farabi et al., 2023; Febrian, 2024).

In Indonesian Islamic schools, teachers resist secularizing reforms because they are concerned that it would weaken the moral and spiritual growth of students (Husaeni, 2023). When drawing on their religious capital, teachers resist reforms which, they believe, undermine the school's Islamic identity. It highlights the way in which teachers operate as social agents in reform to protect the religious core of the curriculum from secular influences. Teachers' deep religious knowledge and membership in religious communities motivate them to defend religious education from secularization (Brown et al., 2021; Hayadin et al., 2020). Teachers well-grounded in Islamic teachings are better positioned to counter-reforms they see as undermining the religious basis of education. They see their religious capital as a defense that allows them to resist the secularizing pressures in education. The active resistance in these contexts reflects the multifaceted nature of teacher agency. Teachers are not passive recipients of policy changes. They exercise agency by actively resisting reforms that they perceive as threatening to their educational and religious values.

*Curriculum negotiation as strategic leverage of religious capital*

In Indonesian Islamic schools, teachers navigate two formidable curricular frames: the national education standards and Islamic religious values. The results show that a large number of teachers do not accept or refuse reform and that they use religious capital strategically to interpret and reinterpret state-mandated content in order not to lose their integrity with religion. This negotiation manifests in subjects such as civics, science, social studies, and other subjects where Islamic views are incorporated into secular curricula through teachers, who reinvent the reform agenda as an opportunity for religious strengthening, rather than as a threat (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Şahin, 2018).

This is a subtle act of teacher agency. Teachers are not just passive implementers of policy; they are curriculum negotiators, finding ways of creatively bringing religious identity and educational change into alignment. Their chances of success are underpinned by their religious capital, textual knowledge, spiritual commitment and membership of religious networks, which provide them with the theological basis and moral authority to reconceptualize educational content (Gamal, 2020; Halai & Durrani, 2017). In this sense, religious capital is a resource teachers use strategically in order to maintain their religious commitment in response to the demands of educational modernization (Tisdell, 2003).

Balancing national competences with Islamic worldviews, these educators become the means through which curriculum is taught and pedagogical equilibrium is maintained for their respective institutions. What takes place is not so much a compromise as a mediated adjustment, and teacher agency is shown to be a matter not merely of resistance or compliance but of delicate acts of translation between religious and secular practices (Alkouatli, 2018; Sullivan, 2001).

*Leveraging social recognition to legitimize curriculum reform*

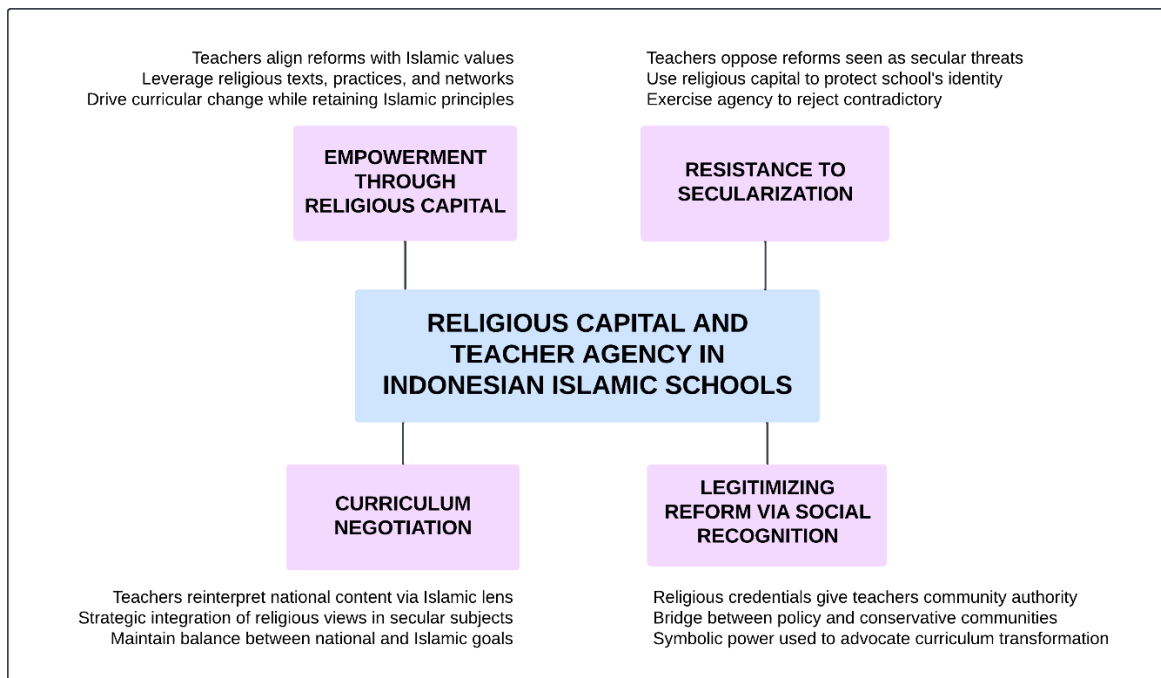
Another significant finding demonstrates that religious capital as a social force operates as a form of social legitimized authority that enables teachers to effect curricular change, rather than solely as an asset at one's disposal. Teachers who have legitimate religious qualifications, such as those who have completed *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and certification in Islamic law, are religious leaders in the community; they also have a greater level of moral credibility. Such social conscience extends their agency to represent the need for curriculum transformation that is considered religiously sound and educationally meaningful (Hashim, 2007; Husaeni, 2023).

Frequently, religious authority empowers teachers to move into informal decision-making areas of schools and communities. Their position creates a bridge between educational policy and community expectations, particularly in contexts where reform is met with skepticism due to deeply rooted conservative values (Hefner, 2008; Levzion & Pouwels, 2000; Tan, 2014; Zine, 2008). This is in line with Bourdieu (1986) conception of capital as socially situated. Religious capital, when it is socially

acknowledged, is a source of symbolic power that teachers may employ to impact curricula (Sullivan, 2001; Verter, 2003).

These teachers, who often play the role of internal change agents, will introduce new pedagogical methods (from the West, for example), blended curricula or modernized textbooks, yet present what they are doing as rooted in Islamic tenets. Since their authority is affirmed by institutional heads and religious representatives at the local level, they encounter less opposition when advocating for change (Bok, 2021; Niyozov & Memon, 2011). This process suggests that successful curriculum reform in Islamic schools may not lie in formal policy or in training alone but rather requires the teacher's use of her religious capital in socially privileged roles.

See Figure 2 below, the dimensions of teacher agency shaped by religious capital in Indonesian Islamic schools.



**Figure 2.** Four ways religious capital shapes teacher agency in curriculum reform

The figure illustrates four key ways in which religious capital informs teacher agency during curriculum reform: (1) empowerment through religious capital, where teachers drive change aligned with Islamic values; (2) resistance to secularization, in which religious beliefs are used to oppose perceived threats to Islamic identity; (3) curriculum negotiation, where teachers reinterpret national curricula through an Islamic lens; and (4) legitimizing reform via social recognition, where religious authority enhances credibility and community acceptance of reform efforts.

## DISCUSSION

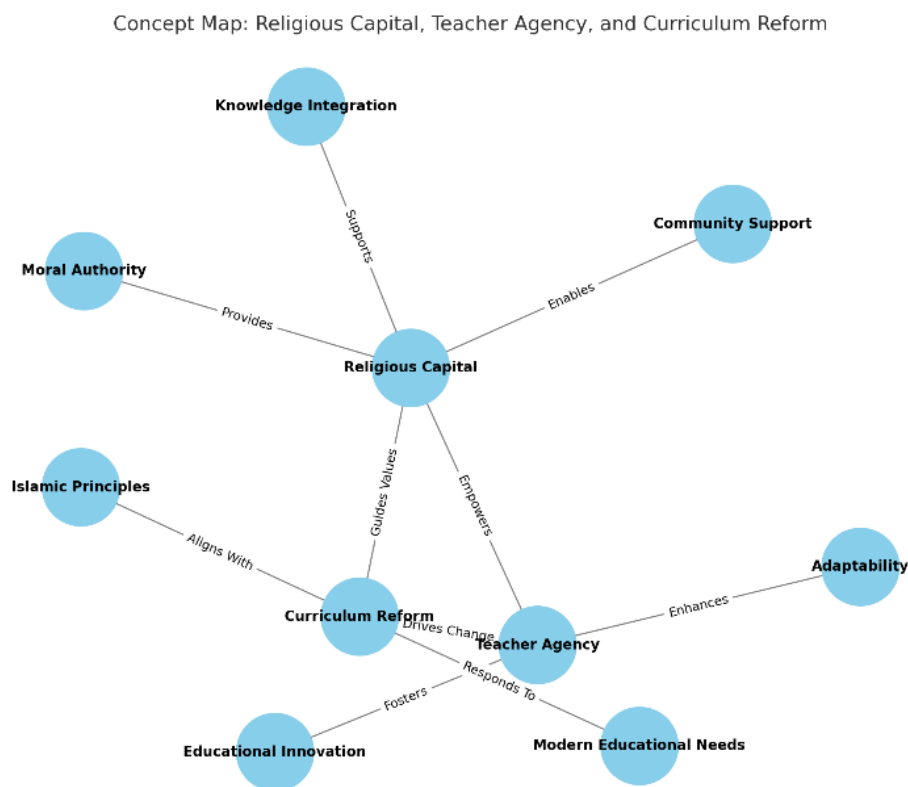
A critical dimension of teacher agency is the capacity to manage and navigate conflicting demands from various stakeholders. In the context of Indonesian Islamic schools, teachers frequently find themselves at the intersection of competing priorities: the secular requirements imposed by the national education system and the religious objectives of their institutions (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024; Hosaini et al., 2024; Hussin et al., 2024; Laksana & Wood, 2019). This dual responsibility creates significant challenges, as teachers must ensure that students achieve the academic competence required for national assessments while fostering moral and religious growth (Hosaini et al., 2024). Such balancing acts necessitate a high degree of adaptability and decision-making, exemplifying teacher agency in navigating conflicting expectations.

In this context, teacher agency reflects the need to mediate between secular and religious priorities to provide holistic education. For instance, teachers could employ religious tenets as a framework for teaching secular subjects, thus incorporating the lessons into a curriculum that is academically rigorous yet spiritually relevant. This integration demonstrates how teachers are able to adapt curricular and teaching methods to align with institutional goals and state requirements simultaneously. As “socio-religious curators,” teachers in Islamic schools tailor their pedagogical styles to fulfil the aspirations of policymakers, parents, and religious leaders (Brooks et al., 2020; Ezzani et al., 2023; Hanafi et al., 2021; Pohl, 2006; Said et al., 2023). Teacher agency is also key to resolving tensions that emerge from different stakeholder expectations. Parents and religious authorities might prefer Islamic beliefs rather than national education standards that emphasize measurable academic achievements. Teachers negotiate these tensions, leveraging their expertise to reconcile competing demands in ways that serve students holistically (Bittencourt & Willetts, 2018; Shilon, 2024; Stillman & Anderson, 2017; Triantoro et al., 2023). The intermediate of these issues attests to an ever-moving dynamic of teacher agency in practice.

Teachers draw strength from individualized religious capital and a religious capital embedded in their social networks, which offer moral and practical support for achieving curriculum reforms. The role of social networks (such as religious communities, religious leaders and parents) in teacher agency is fundamental in increasing teacher agency. Teachers rooted in strong social networks are able to mobilize support for curricular changes in line with shared values, further increasing their agency. Social networks allow teachers to work together with other teachers and religious leaders to discuss and advocate for curriculum reforms (Bok, 2021). Community plays a vital force in protecting teachers in their attempt to keep their religious values when the education system prioritizes secular curriculum reform (Armita, 2024; Idris, 2024; Latif, 2019; Lestari & Fauzi, 2021; Porter, 2023; Sen, 2017; Supratno et al., 2018; Zulfikar, 2018). This social capital enables teachers to mobilize wider support for reforms to curriculums so that religious teaching is at the center of the education system.

Social networks not only offer the moral and spiritual support teachers need but also expose them to practical resources that support reform. They provide a platform for sharing teaching resources, pedagogical strategies and professional development opportunities that are consistent with Islamic teachings. By collaborating with religious leaders, parents, and other teachers, teachers can ensure that policies are implemented aligning with religious teachings despite external demands to remove them. Bok (2021) argues that such networks strengthen teachers' moral authority and offer support for petitions, lobbying, and advocacy efforts. They act as facilitators to maintain religious values during secular curriculum changes. Eventually, social networks enable teachers to come together for reforms that reflect Islamic values at a grassroots level and help strengthen their agency as change makers for a better education process.

Refer to Figure 3 below for an illustration of how religious capital, teacher agency, and curriculum reform are interrelated.



**Figure 3.** The relationship between key elements of religious capital, teacher agency, and curriculum reform

Figure 3 illustrates the interplay between religious capital, teacher agency, and curriculum reform within Indonesian Islamic schools. Religious capital serves as the foundation, offering moral authority, community legitimacy, and a framework for integrating Islamic knowledge into education. This capital empowers teacher agency, which enhances teachers' adaptability and capacity to foster educational innovation. In

turn, teacher agency actively drives curriculum reform by aligning educational practices with both religious and national standards. Curriculum reform, shaped by these forces, seeks to balance adherence to Islamic principles with responsiveness to the demands of modern education. Together, these components form a dynamic relationship in which religious capital fuels agency, agency informs reform, and reform maintains equilibrium between tradition and transformation.

Religious capital, while certainly a source of power for teachers, is also a source of challenge and limitation. A lot of teachers get caught in a dilemma when their religious teachings become so strict that they feel unable to adapt to modern methods. Religion has been taught at the expense of pedagogy, and teachers may not find it easy to use new strategies or even to develop critical thinking skills which are increasingly emphasized in present reforms (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020).

Moreover, religious authorities can limit the authority of teachers, especially in Islamic schools where the religious leaders have an important place in providing instructions regarding education. In certain schools, including in the internal context, the influence of religious leaders is significantly pronounced, which makes it difficult for teachers to implement reforms that contradict established religious principles (Apple & Christian-Smith, 2017; Bros & Schechter, 2022; Davies & Rizk, 2017; Husaeni, 2023; Sarkissian, 2015). It has made teachers feel obliged to comply with religious instructions rather than pursue reforms that may clash with traditional teaching methods. The religious element also has a role as teachers in Islamic schools may be given very little autonomy as religious leaders are codified in the educational structures. The closures were the result of top-down religious dictates, leaving teachers with little incentive to apply reforms that might conflict with embedded pedagogies. These challenges highlight the limitations to teacher agency within religious contexts. Although it enables religious capital for teachers to be empowered to pursue reforms, it also restricts their creativity and ability to evolve in response to modernizing reforms. The difficulty is in reconciling religious fidelity with modern academic demands.

In addition to the dynamics of balancing stakeholder expectations and mobilizing social networks, the findings further highlight how curriculum reform in Indonesian Islamic schools is shaped by the strategic negotiation teachers undertake between religious and secular imperatives. Unlike passive acceptance or active resistance, many educators leverage their religious capital to reinterpret secular curriculum content in ways that preserve theological integrity while addressing national learning goals. This form of agency reflects what Şahin (2018) and Niyozov and Memon (2011) describe as "curricular adaptation through cultural mediation," where secular knowledge is framed within Islamic epistemology. Teachers act as moral architects, embedding faith-based ethics into subjects such as science, civics, or language learning. This practice does not merely resolve tension but reimagines reform as an opportunity for alignment rather than opposition. Halai and Durrani (2017) and Gamal (2020) similarly note that such adaptive agency is often under-recognized but

essential in preserving both academic rigor and Islamic identity in contexts of curricular transition. Moreover, Anshori (2021) and Warapsari et al. (2023) emphasize that teachers who blend Islamic ethical frameworks with contemporary pedagogy not only maintain curricular coherence but also deepen students' character development.

Another significant dimension of teacher agency revealed in this study is the role of social legitimacy and religious authority in facilitating curriculum reform. Teachers with strong religious credentials, such as those who have studied in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding house) or serve as respected community figures, possess a form of symbolic capital that enhances their ability to legitimise changes in pedagogy and content. These educators are not only seen as doctrinally sound but are often entrusted with navigating reform because of the confidence stakeholders place in their moral judgment. This confirms Bourdieu (1986) theory that capital becomes actionable when recognized within a social field, in this case through the endorsement of community actors, parents, and school leaders (Sullivan, 2001; Verter, 2003). Teachers who are socially affirmed in their religious knowledge can advocate for innovation with less friction, even when changes challenge the status quo. Bok (2021) and Hashim (2007) emphasize that in religious settings, teacher legitimacy is relational and rooted in spiritual authenticity. Similarly, Yakavets et al. (2022) demonstrate that in faith-based education systems, leadership legitimacy often stems more from moral standing and religious capital than from formal bureaucratic authority.

Teachers in this position not only drive change but also mediate potential backlash. They act as internal reformers whose authority comes from alignment with the community's religious expectations. As observed by Saeed (2022) and Ayub et al. (2020), such educators are more effective in implementing reform because they have the trust required to frame innovation as the preservation—not erosion—of Islamic values. These findings point toward the layered nature of teacher agency in religious educational institutions. Teachers are not only pedagogical actors but also cultural brokers and community leaders. Their effectiveness in curriculum reform is influenced not just by training or policy awareness, but also by their embeddedness in religious networks, the trust they command, and their interpretive ability to reconcile modern educational frameworks with enduring Islamic principles.

Recognizing this complexity is essential for designing reform initiatives that are contextually appropriate and socially sustainable. Policy efforts should therefore support teacher professional development that strengthens both pedagogical competence and religious-cultural fluency, empowering teachers to function as agents of integration rather than tension. As noted by Miller (2019) and Wright and Wright (2024), successful curricular transformation in religious settings must begin with the acknowledgment that teacher agency is inseparable from the cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions of their professional identity.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a clear account of the complex interplay of religious capital, teacher agency, and the process of curriculum reform in the context of Indonesian Islamic schools. It shows how teachers use their religious capital to play the role of socio-religious curators, a balancing act between the demands of Islamic values and contemporary pedagogical constructs. On the other hand, the strictness of religious guidelines may stifle, at times, innovation and flexibility, which highlights the importance of a conscientious approach toward embedding religious principles into the curriculum. The reforms aim to keep Islamic education true to its cultural and religious roots while achieving academic excellence, and teacher agency emerges as one such vital factor behind it. It also points to the power of social networks and community support to form teachers' movements, making teachers the participatory agents of change and creating a proactive environment of change in society. Furthermore, reforms will need to be context-sensitive and decentralized so that teachers and curriculum developers work together, empowered by educators, religious leaders, and policymakers, to ensure that reforms are sustainable and inclusive. By tackling these issues and navigating through obstacles such as the reluctance to secularization within these communities and promoting harmony between Islamic fundamentals and contemporary pedagogical practices, Islamic schools can discover the road to their development whilst simultaneously trying to maintain their ethnic and religious profile.

This study's findings offer important practical implications for educational practice and policy, particularly for Indonesian Islamic schools. A major implication is balancing religious commitments with pedagogical innovation. Teachers must be empowered through training programs that not only reflect but also cater to the current teaching landscape whilst remaining true to Islamic values; as such, teachers will lead students to academic excellence without sacrificing their cultural and religious commitments. Policymakers must protect teacher agency by facilitating collaboration with religious leaders and policymakers so that teachers can cultivate their roles as socio-religious curators to bring curriculum reforms in line with academic standards as well as with Islam. Resistance to the perceived secularization of education must be addressed through constructive dialogue and workshops demonstrating modern education's compatibility with Islamic values. The social networks of teachers must be leveraged as a resource for both advocacy and reform efforts supported by formal partnerships between schools and religious organizations. In addition, a comprehensive educational experience can only be achieved through integrating the Islamic curriculum alongside general subjects. Frameworks that mandate this integration, with accompanying teacher training and sufficient funding, should be designed by policymakers. Due to Indonesian Islamic schools' distinct socio-religious and cultural context, a sensitive and flexible approach to curriculum reform is essential. Decentralized policies can give schools the ability to tailor reforms to the needs of their local context, making them more inclusive and more relevant. Finally,

while there are strict religious guidelines that teachers must adhere to, they are now encouraged to innovate within this framework. This necessitates a nuanced policy framework that recognizes the unique religious ethos of Islamic schools while fostering academic excellence and innovation.

Future research should investigate how the dynamics play out across different regional contexts, thus offering comparative insights into the importance of religious capital and teacher agency within curriculum reform. Longitudinal studies might investigate the enduring impact of such reforms on teacher agency and student outcomes. These suggestions for an interdisciplinary approach, considering insights from sociology, education, and religious studies, would add potential social diversity to the investigation of the relationship between religious capital and pedagogical difference. Moreover, studies on whether decentralized or centralized curriculum reform is most effective, especially in protecting religious values alongside encouraging innovation, would be helpful. In conclusion, investigating the interplay between religious capital and digital pedagogies can offer pragmatic solutions to incorporate technology in Islamic education. Exploration along these paths in future research will enhance understanding and inform the design of effective educational practices and policies.

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