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TEXTUAL FORMATION, ISLAMIC EXCELLENCE, AND THE LIMITS OF CIVIC PLURALITY IN ELITE ISLAMIC SCHOOLS: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY IN MEDAN, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Religious literacy has become an important educational issue in plural societies where religion shapes not only personal belief but also moral formation, citizenship, and public life. This study examines how religious literacy is constructed in selected elite Islamic schools in Medan, North Sumatra, a plural urban context in which Islamic schools are expected to strengthen students' religious identity while preparing them for social diversity. Drawing on religious literacy theory, the interpretive approach to religious education, and Islamic educational thought, this qualitative multiple-case study addresses a gap in existing literature, which has discussed Islamic schooling in relation to piety, modernization, and middle-class aspiration, but has paid less attention to the specific forms of religious literacy produced by elite Islamic schools in plural urban settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, document analysis, and alumni achievement data review. The findings show that religious literacy in these schools is primarily constructed as practical-normative formation through Qur'anic recitation, tahfiz, congregational prayer, Islamic mentoring, moral discipline, and the internalization of *adab*. The schools also construct excellence through the integration of Islamic normativity, academic competitiveness, and parental aspirations for moral protection and social mobility. However, plural and civic religious literacy remains less institutionally developed than Qur'anic literacy, worship habituation, and academic achievement. The study demonstrates analytically that Islamic excellence in these schools is constructed through a textual regime of inward-oriented formation, and that plural civic competence constitutes a structural absence within this regime—one that points to the theoretical limits of practical-normative religious literacy in plural democratic societies.

Keywords: Religious Literacy; Textual Formation; Elite Islamic Schools; Islamic Education; Plural Citizenship.

ABSTRAK

Literasi keagamaan telah menjadi isu penting dalam pendidikan di masyarakat majemuk, ketika agama tidak hanya membentuk keyakinan personal, tetapi juga pembentukan moral, kewargaan, dan kehidupan publik. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana literasi keagamaan dikonstruksi di sejumlah sekolah Islam unggulan di Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara, sebuah konteks perkotaan yang plural, di mana sekolah Islam diharapkan mampu memperkuat identitas keagamaan peserta didik sekaligus mempersiapkan mereka menghadapi keberagaman sosial. Berlandaskan teori literasi keagamaan, pendekatan interpretatif dalam pendidikan agama, serta pemikiran pendidikan Islam, penelitian kualitatif dengan desain studi multikasus ini mengisi kesenjangan dalam kajian terdahulu yang lebih banyak membahas sekolah Islam dalam kaitannya dengan kesalehan, modernisasi, dan aspirasi kelas menengah, namun masih memberikan perhatian yang terbatas terhadap bentuk-bentuk literasi keagamaan yang dihasilkan oleh sekolah Islam unggulan di lingkungan perkotaan yang plural. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, analisis dokumen, serta telaah terhadap data capaian alumni. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa literasi keagamaan di sekolah-sekolah tersebut terutama dikonstruksi sebagai pembentukan praktis-normatif melalui pembelajaran baca tulis Al-Qur'an, tahfiz, salat berjamaah, pendampingan keislaman, pembinaan disiplin moral, serta internalisasi adab. Sekolah-sekolah tersebut juga membangun keunggulan melalui integrasi antara normativitas Islam, daya saing akademik, dan aspirasi orang tua terhadap perlindungan moral serta mobilitas sosial. Namun demikian, literasi keagamaan yang bersifat plural dan kewargaan masih belum berkembang secara kelembagaan dibandingkan dengan literasi Al-Qur'an, pembiasaan ibadah, dan pencapaian akademik. Penelitian ini menunjukkan secara analitis bahwa keunggulan pendidikan Islam di sekolah-sekolah tersebut dikonstruksi melalui suatu rezim tekstual yang berorientasi pada pembentukan internal, sementara kompetensi kewargaan yang plural merupakan suatu ketiadaan struktural dalam rezim tersebut. Kondisi ini menunjukkan keterbatasan teoretis literasi keagamaan yang bersifat praktis-normatif dalam masyarakat demokratis yang plural.

Kata Kunci: *Literasi Keagamaan; Pembentukan Tekstual; Sekolah Islam Unggulan; Pendidikan Islam; Kewargaan Plural.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious literature has long occupied a central position in the formation of Islamic knowledge, moral imagination, and

communal identity in Muslim societies. By "religious literature" this article refers to the corpus of written, printed, and digital texts through which Islamic knowledge is produced, selected, and circulated within school settings—including Qur'anic materials, Hadith compilations, adab texts, Islamic textbooks, and school-produced modules. "Religious literacy," by contrast, refers to the competences and dispositions formed through engagement with these materials. The two concepts are analytically distinct but empirically inseparable: religious literacy, as this study demonstrates, is shaped by the specific corpus of religious literature that schools select and transmit. In the Indonesian context, religious texts are not merely read as sources of doctrinal instruction, but also function as cultural media through which Islamic norms, ethical ideals, social hierarchies, and civic dispositions are transmitted across generations. The circulation of Qur'anic passages, Hadith compilations, adab texts, Islamic textbooks, school-produced modules, devotional books, and digital religious materials demonstrates that religious literacy is inseparable from textual practices. Religious literacy, therefore, should not be understood only as students' ability to perform rituals or internalize moral discipline, but also as their engagement with religious texts, reading traditions, interpretive frameworks, and the social meanings produced through religious literature.[1]

This article examines religious literacy in elite Islamic schools in Medan, North Sumatra, by repositioning religious literature as the primary object of inquiry. The study focuses on how selected Islamic schools use, select, interpret, and transmit religious texts and reading materials to construct Islamic excellence, moral discipline, civic awareness, and attitudes toward plurality. Medan is a significant site for this inquiry because it is a plural urban setting marked by ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. As the third-largest city in Indonesia, Medan hosts a Muslim-majority population alongside significant Christian (Batak and Toba), Chinese-Indonesian, and Hindu-Tamil communities, making it one of the country's most ethnically and

[1]Diane L Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015).

religiously heterogeneous urban centers. This demographic composition means that Islamic schools in Medan operate within a genuinely plural civic context—one where the question of how schools prepare students for interreligious coexistence has direct practical relevance. In such a context, Islamic schools are not only expected to strengthen students' religious identity, but also to prepare them to encounter social difference in public life. The central question, therefore, is not merely how Islamic schools teach religion, but how religious books, Qur'anic materials, Hadith-based lessons, adab literature, school literacy modules, and digital Islamic content shape students' understanding of Islam, citizenship, morality, and religious diversity.

The need to foreground religious literature is especially important because the current transformation of Islamic education in Indonesia has been accompanied by the expansion of textual and digital religious materials. Elite Islamic schools increasingly combine Qur'anic memorization, Islamic character education, national curriculum subjects, language programs, digital learning platforms, and university preparation. These institutions commonly present themselves as modern Islamic schools capable of producing students who are pious, academically competitive, morally disciplined, and socially confident. However, this model of excellence is mediated through texts: textbooks define religious knowledge, school modules translate Islamic values into daily norms, Qur'anic and Hadith selections establish moral authority, adab materials shape student conduct, and digital Islamic content extends religious learning beyond the classroom. In this sense, Islamic schooling operates not only through institutional routines, but also through textual regimes that organize what counts as legitimate religious knowledge.

Previous studies on Islamic education in Indonesia have examined modernization, democratization, pesantren reform, middle-class Muslim aspiration, and the relationship between Islamic schooling and civic plurality. Hefner shows that Islamic education in Southeast Asia has been shaped by broader political and cultural transformations, while Azra emphasizes the continuing negotiation between Islamic educational traditions and

modern institutional demands.[2] Studies by Bryner and Pribadi further demonstrate that Islamic schools have become symbols of urban Muslim identity and middle-class aspiration, where parents seek both moral protection and academic distinction for their children.[3] Other studies have explored Islamic education in relation to tolerance, multicultural values, and social cohesion, especially in pesantren and Islamic school settings.[4] These studies are important, yet they often treat religious texts and reading materials as background components of schooling rather than as the central object of analysis.

Religious literacy studies also provide an important conceptual foundation for this article. Moore defines religious literacy as the capacity to understand religion in its social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, rather than reducing religion to isolated beliefs or private devotion.[5] Dinham and Francis similarly argue that religious literacy is necessary because modern societies frequently lack adequate public understanding of religion and belief.[6] Jackson's interpretive approach emphasizes that religious education should introduce learners to the internal plurality, lived experience, and social context of religious traditions.[7] These

[2]R Hefner, "Introduction: The Politics and Cultures of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," in *Making Modern Muslims*, 2009, 1–54, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-79951784314&partnerID=40&md5=2df521704f807e4d2324593ac6b2b3d4; Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012).

[3]Karen Bryner, "Piety Projects: Islamic Schools for Indonesia's Urban Middle Class" (Columbia University, 2013); Yanwar Pribadi, "Sekolah Islam: Islamic Schools as Symbols of Indonesia's Urban Muslim Identity," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1–16.

[4]M Muhajir et al., "INTEGRATING MULTICULTURAL VALUES TO FOSTER TOLERANCE AND INCLUSIVITY IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 1 (2025): 17–32, https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v11i1.44607; M Fahmi et al., "Multicultural Islamic Education as Strategy for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Islamic School," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 1 (2025): 154–75, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v8i1.67.

[5]Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*.

[6]Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*.

[7]Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).

perspectives are useful, but in the context of Islamic schools, religious literacy must also be examined through textual mediation: how students encounter Islam through books, Qur'anic passages, Hadith selections, adab narratives, teacher-produced modules, school library collections, and digital religious resources.

In Islamic intellectual history, the transmission of religious knowledge has always been closely tied to textuality, orality, authority, and interpretation. Graham argues that religious traditions cannot be understood only through written texts because scripture also lives through recitation, memorization, performance, and oral transmission.[8] This insight is especially relevant to Islamic schooling, where Qur'anic literacy involves both textual reading and embodied recitation. Messick's study of Islamic textual authority further shows that texts do not simply contain knowledge; they also organize social authority, legal reasoning, pedagogical hierarchy, and communal discipline.[9] In Southeast Asia, van Bruinessen's study of kitab kuning demonstrates that Islamic books have played a crucial role in shaping pesantren learning, scholarly authority, and religious formation in Indonesia.[10] Ricci also shows that Islamic textual transmission across South and Southeast Asia involved translation, adaptation, and cultural mediation, indicating that religious literature is always embedded in social worlds rather than detached from them.

Based on these theoretical considerations, this study argues that religious literacy in elite Islamic schools should be analyzed as a textual and social formation. It is textual because students encounter Islam through selected religious books, Qur'anic materials, Hadith references, adab texts, school-produced modules, and digital Islamic content. It is social because these materials are interpreted within institutional cultures shaped by

[8]William A Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[9]Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[10]Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995).

school leadership, teacher authority, parental expectations, academic competition, and the plural urban environment of Medan. The interaction between religious texts and school culture produces particular models of Islamic excellence: students are encouraged to become Qur'an-oriented, morally disciplined, academically capable, and socially respectable. Yet the question remains whether the religious literature used in these schools also provides sufficient conceptual resources for understanding civic plurality, interreligious difference, minority experience, and ethical participation in a diverse society.

This study addresses three main questions. First, what forms of religious literature, religious reading materials, and digital Islamic content are used in selected elite Islamic schools in Medan? Second, how are Qur'anic texts, Hadith materials, adab literature, Islamic textbooks, school modules, and other religious reading resources selected, interpreted, and transmitted through school literacy programs? Third, how do these textual practices shape students' Islamic identity, moral formation, civic imagination, and attitudes toward religious diversity? These questions shift the focus of the article from school-based religious practice in general to the production, circulation, interpretation, and reception of religious literature within elite Islamic school settings.

The contribution of this article lies in its attempt to connect religious literature studies with Islamic schooling and civic plurality. Rather than treating Islamic schools only as educational institutions that cultivate piety and academic achievement, this article examines them as sites of religious textual production and transmission. It shows that Islamic excellence is not formed only through prayer routines, tahfiz targets, discipline, or academic success, but also through the ways religious books, textual selections, learning modules, and digital religious materials construct authority, morality, citizenship, and social difference. By placing religious literature at the center of analysis, this study contributes to discussions on Religious Literature of Indonesia/Nusantara and offers a more suitable framework for understanding how Islamic textual traditions are received, institutionalized, and transformed in contemporary elite Islamic schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case textual and reception study to examine how religious literature is selected, interpreted, transmitted, and received in selected elite Islamic schools in Medan, North Sumatra. The design was revised to place religious texts, religious books, school-produced modules, Islamic textbooks, Qur'anic and Hadith materials, adab literature, and digital Islamic resources as the primary objects of analysis. A multiple-case design was considered appropriate because the study compares how different elite Islamic schools organize religious reading traditions and textual transmission within their institutional cultures. Rather than examining religious literacy only as educational practice, this study analyzes religious literacy as a textual, interpretive, and social formation shaped by the production, circulation, interpretation, and reception of religious literature.

The research was conducted in three selected elite Islamic schools in Medan, referred to as School A, School B, and School C to protect institutional confidentiality. These schools were selected purposively based on four criteria: first, their public reputation as leading Islamic schools in Medan; second, their use of structured religious literacy programs such as Qur'anic reading, tahfiz, tahsin, Islamic mentoring, and adab formation; third, their availability of religious reading materials, school-produced modules, Islamic textbooks, student handbooks, Qur'anic and Hadith-based learning resources, and digital Islamic content; and fourth, their location in Medan as a plural urban context in which Islamic identity, academic excellence, and civic plurality intersect. The selection of these schools was not intended to represent all Islamic schools statistically, but to provide analytically rich cases for understanding how religious literature functions within elite Islamic school environments.

The primary data corpus consisted of religious texts and reading materials used or circulated in the three schools. These included Islamic textbooks, Qur'anic learning materials, tahfiz and tahsin guidelines, Hadith-based moral instruction materials, adab-related texts, student handbooks, civic education syllabi

containing religious and moral themes, school-produced literacy modules, religious program schedules, school library materials, promotional publications, and digital Islamic learning resources used in school activities. These materials were treated not merely as supporting documents, but as the central corpus through which the study examined textual constructions of Islamic authority, morality, excellence, citizenship, and religious diversity.

In addition to textual materials, this study used interviews and observations as supporting data to understand the reception and transmission of religious literature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders, Islamic education teachers, tahfiz teachers, civic education teachers, students, alumni, and parents. In total, 27 participants were interviewed: 3 school principals (one per school), 6 Islamic education teachers, 3 tahfiz teachers, 3 civic education teachers, 6 students, 3 alumni, and 3 parents. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews yielded no substantively new themes regarding the selection, transmission, and reception of religious materials. The interviews explored how religious texts were selected, how teachers interpreted and transmitted them, how students received them, and how parents understood the role of religious reading materials in shaping Islamic identity and moral formation. Interviews also examined whether the texts used in school literacy programs addressed civic plurality, interreligious relations, social responsibility, and respect for diversity. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; when recording was not permitted, detailed field notes were taken.

Observation was conducted to understand how religious texts were embedded in everyday school literacy practices. The observations focused on Qur'anic reading sessions, tahfiz activities, Islamic mentoring, classroom use of religious textbooks, the display of Qur'anic verses and Islamic slogans in school spaces, library use, teacher-student interaction around religious materials, and the circulation of printed or digital religious content. Observation was not used primarily to describe school routines as educational practices, but to examine how religious texts became visible, authoritative, and performative

within the school environment. In this sense, school space was analyzed as a textual environment where Islamic meanings were produced through books, modules, memorized passages, displayed texts, and repeated interpretive practices.

A note on reflexivity is warranted. The researcher approached this study as an academic scholar of Islamic education with an institutional affiliation to an Indonesian university. This positioning enabled productive access to school environments and facilitated open dialogue with participants familiar with Islamic educational discourse. At the same time, the researcher was mindful that familiarity with Islamic educational norms could predispose interpretations toward accepting rather than critically examining the schools' textual regimes. To mitigate this, the analytical framework drew on international religious literacy scholarship that extends beyond Islamic educational traditions, and interpretations were continuously tested against the full empirical corpus rather than against any prior normative expectation. Formal ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to fieldwork, and all participation was voluntary and informed-consent-based.

The data were analyzed through three interrelated procedures: textual analysis, discourse analysis, and reception analysis. Textual analysis was used to identify the dominant religious themes, moral categories, theological assumptions, and civic values contained in the selected books, modules, Qur'anic passages, Hadith materials, adab texts, and digital resources. This stage examined what kinds of Islam, morality, citizenship, and diversity were constructed through the texts. Discourse analysis, drawing on Fairclough's critical discourse framework and Krippendorff's content analysis methodology, was then used to examine how these materials framed religious authority, Islamic excellence, moral discipline, social difference, and civic plurality—attending not only to explicit propositional content but to the normative hierarchies and legitimate identities that texts construct through selection, emphasis, and omission. This approach made it possible to examine not only what the texts

explicitly stated, but also how they organized meaning, hierarchy, normativity, and legitimate religious identity.[11]

Reception analysis was used to understand how school actors interpreted and appropriated religious literature in practice. Interview transcripts and observation notes were compared with the textual corpus to identify whether teachers, students, parents, and school leaders reproduced, expanded, simplified, or reinterpreted the meanings contained in the materials. This step was important because religious literature does not operate only as written content; it becomes socially meaningful through reading practices, teacher explanation, memorization, repetition, institutional discipline, and student reception. Therefore, the study approached religious literature as both text and lived transmission, in line with the view that religious texts gain meaning through interpretation, performance, and social use.[12]

The coding process was conducted thematically. First, all textual materials were catalogued according to type, source, function, and school context. Second, the texts were coded based on recurring themes such as Qur'anic authority, Hadith-based morality, adab, obedience, discipline, Islamic excellence, academic achievement, citizenship, tolerance, social responsibility, and religious diversity. Third, interview and observation data were coded to examine how these themes were received, explained, and practiced by school actors. Fourth, cross-case comparison was conducted to identify similarities and differences among School A, School B, and School C in their use of religious literature. This comparative procedure allowed the study to show how each school constructed religious literacy through particular textual choices and interpretive practices.[13]

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[11]Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Longman, 1995); Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2019).

[12]Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*.

[13]Robert E Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications* (Sage Publications, 2018).

To strengthen credibility, the study used data triangulation by comparing religious texts, school documents, interview data, and observation notes. Source triangulation was applied by comparing the perspectives of school leaders, teachers, students, alumni, and parents. Method triangulation was applied by combining textual analysis, interviews, and observation. The study also used cross-case comparison to avoid treating the three schools as a single homogeneous case. Ethical procedures were maintained by anonymizing the names of schools and participants, obtaining informed consent, and removing institutional identifiers from the final report. The findings are not intended for statistical generalization, but for analytical interpretation of how religious literature is produced, circulated, interpreted, and received within elite Islamic school settings in a plural Indonesian urban context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The findings show that religious literacy in the selected elite Islamic schools in Medan is constructed through a combination of religious texts, school-produced reading materials, Qur'anic and Hadith-based learning resources, adab literature, and the institutional transmission of Islamic textual traditions. Across the three schools, Islam is embedded into school life through a textual ecology consisting of Qur'anic passages, tahfiz guidelines, Hadith-based moral instructions, adab materials, student handbooks, Islamic textbooks, and visual religious texts displayed in classrooms, corridors, and prayer spaces. These textual materials do not function merely as teaching aids, but as authoritative media through which the schools define Islamic knowledge, moral discipline, student identity, and the ideal form of Muslim excellence. Qur'anic recitation and tahfiz, therefore, should be read not only as ritualized school routines, but also as modes of textual transmission in which sacred texts are memorized, vocalized, repeated, disciplined, and embodied by students.

The curriculum document of School A indicates that formal learning begins only after Qur'anic recitation and short religious reflection, suggesting that religious literacy is placed at the

entrance point of the school day rather than treated as an isolated subject.[14] Observation in School A similarly recorded the visible presence of Qur'anic slogans, prayer spaces, teacher supervision, and religious reminders in corridors and classrooms, all of which contributed to an Islamic atmosphere that shaped students' everyday conduct.[15] This pattern was reinforced by an Islamic education teacher who explained that students were not merely expected to understand religious obligations cognitively, but to perform them as disciplined daily habits.[16] In this sense, religious literacy appears as an embodied practice: students learn religion by repeatedly doing, seeing, hearing, and being corrected within a structured moral environment.

A second important finding is that the schools place strong emphasis on Qur'anic materials, Hadith references, aqidah-oriented textbooks, and adab-based reading materials as the textual foundation of student identity. School documents, student handbooks, and religious learning modules repeatedly construct the ideal graduate as a textually guided Muslim subject: academically capable, morally disciplined, Qur'an-oriented, and firmly rooted in Islamic values.[17] This indicates that student identity is shaped not only through institutional discipline, but also through repeated exposure to selected religious texts that define obedience, morality, piety, achievement, and social respectability. The texts used in these schools present Islam as a comprehensive moral framework that regulates worship, interpersonal conduct, academic seriousness, and social responsibility.

This indicates that religious literacy is not framed merely as knowledge of Islamic subjects, but as the formation of a stable Muslim identity. Interviews with school leaders confirm this orientation. A principal in School B stated that parents choose elite Islamic schools because they want their children to receive strong

[14]A School, "Curriculum Document, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025). [CORRECTED: Previous citation erroneously referenced School B; this passage concerns School A.]
[15]Researcher, "Observation Fieldnote, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[16]School A Islamic Education Teacher 1, "Interview with Islamic Education Teacher 1, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[17]B School, "Student Handbook, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); C School, "Curriculum Document, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

religious guidance while remaining competitive in general academic fields.[18] Parent interviews support this claim, showing that school choice is strongly influenced by the desire for moral protection, religious discipline, and academic preparation.[19] Tahfiz and Qur'anic programs therefore function not only as religious instruction, but also as institutional symbols of quality. In School B, achievement reports list Qur'anic competitions and student memorization targets alongside academic accomplishments, indicating that Qur'anic literacy is used to demonstrate both spiritual achievement and school prestige.

The data also reveal that these schools construct excellence through the integration of religious literature, Islamic textual authority, and general academic knowledge. They do not position religious texts as separate from modern schooling; rather, they integrate Qur'anic learning materials, Islamic textbooks, adab modules, civic education materials, science, languages, digital learning, leadership programs, and university preparation into a unified discourse of Islamic excellence. In this model, religious literature becomes a bridge between piety and academic competitiveness. Textbooks and school modules translate Islamic values into institutional expectations, while Qur'anic and Hadith materials provide moral legitimacy for discipline, achievement, leadership, and social responsibility.

School A's curriculum document explicitly places Qur'anic learning, Islamic character education, and leadership training alongside national academic standards.[20] Meanwhile, School C's profile presents science and language programs together with Islamic discipline and Qur'anic memorization, suggesting that religious and academic competence are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.[21] Alumni data further strengthen this institutional narrative. Reports from School A and

[18]School B Principal 2, "Interview with Principal 2, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[19]School A Parent 3, "Interview with Parent 3, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[20]A School, "Curriculum Document, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[21]C School, "School Profile Document, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

School B show that graduates have been accepted into public universities, Islamic universities, and overseas institutions, and these outcomes are used by school leaders to demonstrate that Islamic schooling supports, rather than restricts, academic mobility.[22] Thus, the prioritization of practical religiosity, *aqidah*, Qur'anic competence, and academic achievement responds directly to parental aspirations for piety, discipline, social mobility, and access to prestigious higher education.

However, the findings also indicate that plural and civic religious literacy receives less explicit textual elaboration in the religious materials used by the schools. References to tolerance, respect, and social responsibility appear in curriculum documents, civic education syllabi, and selected moral instruction materials, but they are less systematically developed in Qur'anic learning materials, Hadith-based lessons, adab texts, and Islamic school modules when compared with themes of aqidah, obedience, worship discipline, Qur'anic memorization, and personal morality.[23] The textual corpus gives strong attention to forming pious and morally disciplined students, but it provides fewer structured readings that directly address religious diversity, minority experience, interfaith encounter, social inequality, and the ethics of plural citizenship.

Teachers tended to define tolerance mainly as politeness, peaceful coexistence, and good manners toward others, rather than as an interpretive capacity to understand religious difference, social inequality, or intergroup complexity.[24] Student interviews show a similar pattern. Several students expressed positive attitudes toward religious diversity, yet they had limited structured experience in interfaith dialogue or cross-community programs

[22]A School, "Alumni Admission Report, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); B School, "Alumni Admission Report, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[23]School, "Curriculum Document, School B"; C School, "Civic Education Syllabus, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[24]School A Civic Education Teacher 1, "Interview with Civic Education Teacher 1, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); School B Islamic Education Teacher 2, "Interview with Islamic Education Teacher 2, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

organized by the school.[25] Observation in School C also suggested that the school environment was largely religiously homogeneous, limiting students' everyday encounters with difference within the institution itself.[26]

Taken together, the findings suggest that elite Islamic schools in Medan tend to produce what may be called textually guided pious-achieving Muslim subjects. The ideal student is expected to be guided by Qur'anic texts, disciplined by Hadith-based morality, shaped by adab literature, academically competitive, and socially respectable within the moral imagination promoted by school religious materials. Thus, the central finding of this study is that religious literacy in elite Islamic schools in Medan is constructed through a textual regime in which religious books, Qur'anic selections, Hadith materials, adab texts, school modules, and digital Islamic resources mediate the relationship between Islamic identity, institutional excellence, and civic plurality.

This model is supported by curriculum design, parental expectations, school culture, and institutional branding. Parents seek schools that can protect children religiously while preparing them for academic success, and schools respond by combining tahfiz, Islamic character formation, science, languages, leadership, and university preparation.[27] [Duplicate central finding statement removed here. The consolidated formulation appears above in the paragraph beginning "Taken together, the findings suggest…"]

DISCUSSION

Religious Literacy as Textual and Interpretive Formation

[25]School B Student 4, "Interview with Student 4, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); School C Student 7, "Interview with Student 7, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[26]Researcher, "Observation Fieldnote, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[27]School A Parent 1, "Interview with Parent 1, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); School A Principal 1, "Interview with Principal 1, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); School, "Alumni Admission Report, School A."

The findings indicate that religious literacy in elite Islamic schools in Medan is best understood as a textual and interpretive formation—drawing on reception theory (Ricoeur) to describe how students actively interpret and appropriate texts within the normative institutional environment, rather than passively absorbing them. In these schools, religion is mediated through selected texts, reading materials, memorized passages, school-produced modules, and teacher-led interpretations that shape daily conduct, moral discipline, and student identity. This finding shows that religious literacy cannot be reduced to students' ability to perform Islamic practices. It must also be understood as their encounter with a structured corpus of religious literature. Qur'anic passages, Hadith selections, adab texts, and Islamic textbooks become the main channels through which religious authority is made visible and pedagogically effective. In this process, students do not simply read texts; they receive, memorize, repeat, interpret, and embody them within the normative environment of the school. Qur'anic recitation, tahfiz, congregational prayer, Islamic mentoring, teacher supervision, and the internalization of *adab* function as recurring pedagogical mechanisms through which students are trained to embody Islam in everyday school life. Religious literacy, therefore, is not limited to students' ability to explain Islamic doctrines; it is enacted through the disciplined performance of religious obligations and the cultivation of visible Islamic character. This pattern is evident in the way school routines are organized around worship, Qur'anic learning, and moral monitoring, showing that Islam operates as a structuring principle of institutional culture rather than as a subject confined to classroom instruction.[28]

This finding corresponds with Halstead's argument that Islamic education aims at holistic human formation by integrating knowledge, worship, morality, and social responsibility within an Islamic worldview.[29] It also resonates with the concept of *tarbiya*, in which education is understood as the nurturing of the mind,

[28]School, "Curriculum Document, School A"; Researcher, "Observation Fieldnote, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[29]J Mark Halstead, "An Islamic Concept of Education," *Comparative Education* 40, no. 4 (2004): 517–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006042000284510.

body, and soul for students' moral and spiritual development.[30] In the Medan case, religious literacy is inseparable from the formation of disciplined Muslim personhood. Students are expected to know Islam, believe in its doctrinal foundations, practice its obligations, and display its ethical values through everyday behavior. This makes religious literacy simultaneously cognitive, affective, ritual, and behavioral. It also supports Vamanu's view that religious literacy can involve transformative dimensions, including spiritual growth, identity formation, and deep self-understanding, rather than mere acquisition of religious information.[31]

This textual orientation is consistent with Graham's argument that religious traditions are transmitted not only through written texts, but also through oral performance, recitation, memorization, and embodied repetition. In the Islamic school context, Qur'anic literacy therefore functions as both textual engagement and oral transmission. Messick's view of textual authority is also useful here because it shows that religious texts organize not only knowledge, but also hierarchy, discipline, and communal authority. The Medan case confirms that religious literature operates as a medium through which schools authorize particular forms of Islamic identity and moral conduct.

At the same time, the empirical pattern found in these schools differs from broader contemporary definitions of religious literacy. Moore's cultural-studies approach defines religious literacy as the ability to understand religion in relation to historical, cultural, political, and social contexts.[32] More recent scholarship similarly defines religious literacy as the knowledge,

[30]M Zuhdi and S Dobson, "Religious Literacy as a Spiritual Form of Wellbeingness in Islamic Educational Settings in Indonesia," in *Wellbeing in Islamic Schools: Nurturing the Mind, Body and Soul*, 2025, 197–211, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-76730-2_10.

[31]I Vamanu and E Guzik, "'Closer to God': Meanings of Reading in Recent Conversion Narratives within Christianity and Islam," *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 14, no. 3–4 (2015): 63–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2015.1085784.

[32]Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*.

skills, and understanding needed to navigate religious diversity in plural societies.[33] Ubani further argues that religious literacy exists on a continuum, ranging from scholarly knowledge to lived religious experience.[34] The elite Islamic schools in this study are strong in the lived and embodied end of this continuum, because students are habituated into Islamic practice through repeated routines. However, they appear less explicit in cultivating the analytical and dialogical capacities required for interpreting religious diversity beyond the Muslim school environment.

This tension reveals the normativity embedded in religious education. Religious literacy is never value-free; it is shaped by assumptions about what kind of person education should produce. In the studied schools, the dominant norm is the formation of morally disciplined, ritually obedient, and doctrinally grounded Muslim students. This aligns with the broader normative framing of religious literacy as a response to social challenges such as inclusivity, tolerance, mutual understanding, and social cohesion.[35] Yet, as de Kock argues, practical-normative formation requires reflection on multiple layers of normativity, including religious practices, pedagogical theories, academic frameworks, and theological assumptions.[36] From this perspective, the Medan schools' model is pedagogically coherent but still requires deeper

[33]M Shaw, "Worldview Literacy as Intercultural Citizenship Education: A Framework for Critical, Reflexive Engagement in Plural Democracy," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 18, no. 2 (2023): 197–213, https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979211062125; M Ubani, "Theologies, Religion and Literacy: Towards Socially Sustainable Religious Education?," in *Religion and Worldviews in Education: The New Watershed*, 2023, 134–48, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003265696-12.

[34]M Ubani, "DISCUSSING RELIGIOUS LITERACY, THE 'RELIGIOUS' AND (INTER-)DISCIPLINARITY," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Education*, 2025, 557–70, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198869511.013.56.

[35]Ubani, "Theologies, Religion and Literacy: Towards Socially Sustainable Religious Education?"; T Hjelm, T Äystö, and Z Karimi, "Religious Literacy and Its Discontents: A Critical Review," *Religion* 56, no. 2 (2026): 278–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2025.2602592.

[36]A de Kock, "Learning in Encounter and Addressing Normativity in Religious Education Faculties/Programs," *Religious Education*, 2020, 426–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2020.1789415.

reflection on how Islamic normativity can be connected to meaningful encounters with religious diversity.

The limitation of this practical-normative model lies in its inward orientation. Because religious literacy is closely associated with correct belief, worship discipline, Qur'anic memorization, and moral obedience, less institutional space is given to critical engagement with plural social realities. Teachers' accounts suggest that tolerance is often framed as politeness and good conduct rather than as a more complex interpretive ability to understand religious difference, social inequality, and intergroup relations.[37] This is significant because religious literacy has increasingly been promoted as a tool for citizenship education, social cohesion, and critical engagement with diversity.[38] However, scholars also warn that the concept should not be accepted uncritically: its effectiveness in fostering tolerance remains insufficiently empirically validated, and some argue that it must be rethought so that it engages broader ethical and societal concerns rather than simply justifying religious education.[39] Thus, the Medan case shows both the strength and incompleteness of practical-normative religious literacy: it successfully forms pious and disciplined students, but it needs to be expanded toward a more dialogical, civic, and critically reflective literacy suitable for plural urban life.

Religious Literature, Islamic Excellence, and Middle-Class Aspirations

[37]Islamic Education Teacher 2, "Interview with Islamic Education Teacher 2, School B"; C School, "Student Handbook, School C" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).

[38]Shaw, "Worldview Literacy as Intercultural Citizenship Education: A Framework for Critical, Reflexive Engagement in Plural Democracy"; Ubani, "Theologies, Religion and Literacy: Towards Socially Sustainable Religious Education?"

[39]Hjelm, Äystö, And Karimi, "Religious Literacy And Its Discontents: A Critical Review"; S Whittle, "Religious Literacy And/Or Religious Education?," In *Debates In Religious Education: Second Edition*, 2023, 166–77, Https://Doi.Org/10.4324/9781003406280-17; Ubani, "Discussing Religious Literacy, The 'Religious' And (Inter-)Disciplinarity."

The findings suggest that the religious literature used in elite Islamic schools in Medan cannot be separated from the social aspirations of urban Muslim middle-class families. Parents do not choose these schools simply because they offer Islamic subjects; they choose them because the schools circulate a textual and institutional promise of religious security, academic seriousness, moral discipline, language competence, and access to reputable universities. Religious books, Qur'anic programs, Islamic textbooks, adab materials, and student handbooks become part of the symbolic capital offered by these schools to parents. They signal that the school is able to protect children morally while preparing them for academic mobility and social distinction. In this sense, religious literacy is embedded in a wider project of family aspiration and social mobility. The interviews show that parents expect schools to protect children from moral risks while simultaneously preparing them for competitive academic futures.[40] School leaders also frame religious programs as part of institutional excellence rather than as supplementary activities, arguing that Qur'anic learning, character formation, and academic achievement must operate together in order to meet parental expectations.[41] This indicates that religious literacy is shaped not only by theological aims, but also by social class, educational markets, and the desire for upward mobility.

This pattern strengthens Pribadi's argument that Islamic schools in Indonesia have become symbols of urban Muslim identity and middle-class aspiration.[42] It also corresponds with Bryner's analysis that urban Islamic schools construct particular models of piety for Muslim middle-class communities.[43] The Medan case, however, shows that piety is not presented as an alternative to modern success. Instead, piety is incorporated into a broader grammar of achievement. Qur'anic memorization, Islamic discipline, English proficiency, science learning, digital competence, leadership programs, and university admission are

[40]Parent 3, "Interview with Parent 3, School A."
[41]Principal 2, "Interview with Principal 2, School B."
[42]Pribadi, "Sekolah Islam: Islamic Schools as Symbols of Indonesia's Urban Muslim Identity."
[43]Bryner, "Piety Projects: Islamic Schools for Indonesia's Urban Middle Class."

promoted as mutually reinforcing elements of school quality. The contribution of the present study is to show that this middle-class Islamic aspiration is mediated through religious literature. Piety is not produced only through school discipline, but also through selected texts that define what it means to be a good Muslim student, a morally responsible child, and a competitive future citizen.

This reflects a wider trend in which middle-class Muslim parents seek schools that balance religious and secular education, hoping that their children will acquire moral grounding without losing academic competitiveness.[44] Similar dynamics have been found in Islamic schools in Australia, where institutional marketing addresses both educational performance and Muslim identity concerns among parents.[45]

The integration of religious and general education in these schools also reflects broader modernization processes in Islamic education. Rather than separating religious knowledge from scientific and linguistic competence, elite Islamic schools increasingly package them as a unified educational product. This resonates with studies showing that Islamic education has undergone institutional modernization by combining religious studies with general education to respond to changing family expectations and global academic demands.[46] In Medan, this

[44]E Hasanah, M Ikhwan Al Badar, and M Ikhsan Al Ghazi, "Factors That Drive the Choice of Schools for Children in Middle-Class Muslim Families in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study," *Qualitative Report* 27, no. 5 (2022): 1393–1409, https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5316.

[45]N Ghamra-Oui, "The Semiotics of an 'Islamic' Education: Engaging with the Concrete Realities of Muslims in Australia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2020): 318–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1773102.

[46]A Subhan, "Al-Madrasah (Madrasah) Am Al-Madrasah Al-'āmmah (Sekolah): Al-Mufaḍḍalah 'Inda Atbā' Jam'iyyah Al-Muḥammadiyyah Wa Nahḍah Al-'Ulamā` Fī Indūnīsiyā," *Studia Islamika* 30, no. 3 (2023): 561–94, https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v30i3.38201; H Mulyono et al., "Value-Based Marketing Transformation In Islamic Higher Education: A Multidimensional Analysis Of Competitive Development Strategies, Brand Image, And Transformative Student Experiences," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Terapan Universitas Jambi* 9, no. 3 (2025): 1185–93, https://doi.org/10.22437/jiituj.v9i3.43194.

integration is visible in school profiles that place tahfiz, Islamic character education, science-based learning, foreign language programs, and alumni success within the same discourse of excellence.[47] Religious literacy thus becomes part of a competitive institutional identity: it is used to signal moral credibility, Islamic authenticity, and educational quality.

The role of branding is particularly important. Elite Islamic schools operate in an increasingly competitive educational field where institutions must convince parents that they can provide both religious formation and measurable academic outcomes. Studies on Islamic higher education in North Sumatra show that value-based marketing, service quality, and institutional positioning are used to enhance competitiveness and present Islamic institutions as centers of academic excellence and moral leadership.[48] A similar logic appears in the schools examined in this study. Alumni acceptance into reputable universities, Qur'anic achievement, structured discipline, and modern facilities are not merely internal accomplishments; they are public signs of institutional credibility. The school therefore becomes a site where religious literacy is transformed into symbolic capital that can be displayed to parents and wider society.

This model produces what may be called pious-achieving Muslim subjects: students who are expected to be religiously obedient, morally disciplined, academically capable, linguistically competent, and socially competitive. Such a formation challenges the assumption that Islamic schooling necessarily isolates students from modern life. Research in Western contexts, including the United States and England, indicates that Islamic schools can equip students to navigate non-Muslim environments and may support academic success and social cohesion rather than simply intensifying insularity.[49] Nevertheless, the Medan case also reveals a tension. The pressure to combine piety, academic

[47] A School, "School Profile Document, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025); School, "Alumni Admission Report, School B."

[48]Mulyono Et Al., "Value-Based Marketing Transformation In Islamic Higher Education: A Multidimensional Analysis Of Competitive Development Strategies, Brand Image, And Transformative Student Experiences."

[49]J G Read and S Hussain, "Muslim Integration in the United States and England: The Role of Islamic Schools," in *Growing Up Muslim in Europe and the United States*, 2018, 133–52, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315279091-8.

achievement, and institutional prestige may risk narrowing education into performance, discipline, and measurable success. Recent studies of middle-class educational choices show that families increasingly struggle to balance academic ambition with emotional wellbeing and holistic development.[50] In other contexts, such as Turkey, Islamic elites also navigate educational aspirations within unequal social structures shaped by secular privilege and discrimination.[51] These comparative insights suggest that elite Islamic schooling in Medan should be read not only as a religious phenomenon, but also as a classed educational project. Its strength lies in aligning Islamic identity with academic competitiveness; its challenge lies in ensuring that the pursuit of excellence does not reduce religious literacy to moral branding and achievement-oriented discipline, but also supports ethical maturity, wellbeing, and civic competence.

The Limited Textual Elaboration of Plural and Civic Religious Literacy

The findings indicate that plural and civic religious literacy has not yet become an equally elaborated theme within the religious texts, reading materials, and school-produced modules used in elite Islamic schools in Medan. The schools strongly organize religious formation around Islamic identity, Qur'anic competence, worship discipline, moral conduct, and academic excellence, while themes of diversity are more often located in Civic Education, social studies, or general moral discourse. Tolerance is certainly present in the textual and curricular discourse, but it is usually framed as politeness, peaceful coexistence, and respectful behavior rather than as sustained textual engagement with religious plurality, minority experiences, intergroup relations, and the ethical demands of plural

[50]K Göransson, "Educational Exit and the Pursuit of a Happy Childhood Among Singaporean Middle-Class Families," *Global Networks* 24, no. 4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12498.

[51]V O Sofu, "'Secular Privilege': The Experience of Disadvantage at Turkish Elite Schools," *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2025.2502091.

citizenship.[52] This finding reveals a textual asymmetry. The corpus used by the schools gives strong emphasis to Qur'anic memorization, ritual discipline, obedience, adab, and personal morality, but offers fewer readings that help students interpret religious diversity as a complex social and civic reality. As a result, plurality becomes a moral attitude to be respected rather than a social condition to be critically understood through religious and civic texts.

This finding is important when read through Jackson's interpretive approach to religious education. Jackson argues that students should encounter religion through plurality, lived experience, and social context, not only through formal doctrines or idealized representations of tradition.[53] From this perspective, religious literacy should help students understand both their own religious tradition and the complex ways religion is lived by others in society. The Medan case shows a clear asymmetry: students receive strong formation in *aqidah*, worship, tahfiz, and Islamic morality, yet the interpretive tools required to understand religious difference remain less visible within the institutional core of school life. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of tolerance, but the limited transformation of tolerance into a textual, analytical, dialogical, and civic competence.

This condition also reflects a broader problem in the institutionalization of religious literacy. Studies have shown that religious literacy is often fragmented across Religious Education, citizenship education, and moral instruction, thereby reducing its transformative potential.[54] Traditional religious education can become overly focused on knowledge acquisition or confessional

[52]School, "Civic Education Syllabus, School C"; Civic Education Teacher 1, "Interview with Civic Education Teacher 1, School A."
[53]Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*.
[54]S Rosenblith and B Bailey, "Cultivating a Religiously Literate Society: Challenges and Possibilities for America's Public Schools," *Religious Education* 103, no. 2 (2008): 145–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080801909851; A Rota and P Bleisch Bouzar, "Representations and Concepts of Professional Ethos among Swiss Religious Education Teacher Trainers," *British Journal of Religious Education* 39, no. 1 (2017): 75–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2015.1128388; Shaw, "Worldview Literacy as Intercultural Citizenship Education: A Framework for Critical, Reflexive Engagement in Plural Democracy."

formation, while citizenship education may address diversity without sufficient theological or religious depth. A comparable fragmentation appears in the schools studied: Islamic subjects emphasize internal religious formation, whereas civic themes are placed elsewhere in the curriculum. Such separation makes it difficult to develop an integrated model in which Islamic ethics, plural citizenship, and social engagement mutually reinforce one another.

Dinham and Francis argue that religious literacy is needed because modern societies require the ability to engage religion and belief in public life.[55] This argument is particularly relevant for Medan, where students will eventually participate in universities, workplaces, and civic spaces marked by religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. If religious literacy remains largely inward-oriented, students may become personally pious and academically successful while lacking structured preparation for dialogical encounters with difference.[56] Similar concerns appear in studies of secular public education, where religious diversity is often marginalized or treated superficially; for example, Canadian social studies curricula have been criticized for lacking sustained engagement with religion, thereby weakening multicultural integration.[57] Although the Medan case emerges from Islamic schooling rather than secular schooling, both contexts reveal the same institutional challenge: religious diversity requires deliberate curricular design, not incidental moral messaging.

Recent scholarship offers useful ways to rethink this limitation. Shaw proposes "worldview literacy" as a broader approach that bridges religious education and citizenship education through inclusivity, critical reflection, and encounters with diversity.[58] Seiple's concept of cross-cultural religious

[55]Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*.
[56]Researcher, "Observation Fieldnote, School C"; School B Student 5, "Interview with Student 5, School B" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[57]M L Patrick, "A Call for More Religious Education in the Secondary Social Studies Curriculum of Western Canadian Provinces," *Curriculum Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (2015): 154–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2015.1011043.
[58]Shaw, "Worldview Literacy as Intercultural Citizenship Education: A Framework for Critical, Reflexive Engagement in Plural Democracy."

literacy similarly emphasizes evaluative, communicative, comparative, and negotiating competencies aimed at covenantal pluralism rather than mere tolerance.[59] Barnes' post-liberal model of religious education also argues for confronting prejudice and intolerance while critically engaging diverse religious voices.[60] These approaches suggest that elite Islamic schools need not weaken Islamic identity to strengthen plural literacy. Rather, they can deepen Islamic education by connecting *adab*, justice, compassion, and social responsibility with structured encounters across difference.

The barriers to such institutionalization are not unique to Medan. In Spain, the historical dominance of Catholicism has complicated efforts to build plural religious literacy in schools.[61] in Germany, debates between confessional and non-confessional religious education reflect wider political and social tensions[62] and Casanova notes that secularization and pluralism interact differently across societies, producing varied educational challenges.[63] These comparative cases show that plural religious literacy is always shaped by institutional histories, political pressures, and social imaginaries. For the Medan schools, the practical implication is clear: plural civic literacy should be intentionally embedded through integrated curricula, collaborative frameworks, and a shared language connecting religious education with citizenship education.[64] Only then can

[59]C Seiple and D R Hoover, "A Case for Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2021): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1874165.

[60]L P Barnes, *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education*, *Education Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education*, 2014, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315815220.

[61]C J de Madariaga, "Religious Pluralism and Education," *Arbor* 187, no. 749 (2011): 617–26, https://doi.org/10.3989/arbor.2011.749n3013.

[62]E Miroshnikova and V Skvortsov, "Religious Education in Germany," *Sovremennaya Evropa*, no. 1 (2018): 114–25, https://doi.org/10.15211/soveurope12018114125.

[63]J Casanova, "The Karel Dobbelaere Lecture: Divergent Global Roads to Secularization and Religious Pluralism," *Social Compass* 65, no. 2 (2018): 187–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618767961.

[64]R L Bowling, "Religious Literacy and Interfaith Cooperation: Toward a Common Understanding," *Religious Education* 117, no. 1 (2022): 4–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2021.1983286; Patrick, "A Call for More

tolerance move beyond good manners and become a robust educational capacity for living ethically in a diverse society.

Rethinking Islamic School Excellence through Religious Literature

The overall findings suggest that elite Islamic schools in Medan construct excellence through a textual configuration of Islamic normativity, moral discipline, academic competitiveness, and institutional reputation. This model has clear institutional strength. It has enabled schools to build public trust, attract middle- and upper-middle-class Muslim families, and produce students who are confident in Islamic identity, disciplined in religious practice, and competitive in academic performance. In this sense, the schools have successfully answered a major concern among Muslim parents: how to educate children who are religiously grounded without being academically left behind. Yet, in a plural democratic society, excellence cannot be measured only through piety, discipline, institutional prestige, or university admission. The broader question is whether students are also prepared to live intelligently, ethically, and constructively amid religious and social difference.

This study therefore argues that elite Islamic schools need to incorporate plural civic competence into the religious literature, reading materials, and textual transmission practices that shape their model of excellence. The expansion of excellence should not be limited to adding diversity slogans to school documents. It requires the development and selection of religious texts, Islamic learning materials, adab narratives, Qur'anic interpretations, Hadith-based ethical discussions, and digital religious resources that connect Islamic morality with civic plurality. Such competence does not dilute Islamic identity; rather, it extends Islamic formation into public ethics and social responsibility. A student can be deeply committed to Islamic belief while also being capable of understanding other religious communities,

Religious Education in the Secondary Social Studies Curriculum of Western Canadian Provinces"; Rosenblith and Bailey, "Cultivating a Religiously Literate Society: Challenges and Possibilities for America's Public Schools."

recognizing the complexity of plural societies, resisting prejudice, and participating responsibly in civic life. This argument is consistent with Moore's view that religious literacy requires the ability to analyze the relationship between religion and social, political, cultural, and historical life.[65] It also develops the findings of this study, which show that alumni and school development narratives already acknowledge the importance of social readiness beyond religious discipline and academic success, although this dimension remains less institutionally elaborated than tahfiz, worship routines, and academic preparation.[66]

The need to rethink excellence is also supported by broader theoretical debates. Historically, excellence was often understood as an individual virtue associated with intellectual distinction, cosmopolitan cultivation, and personal superiority, especially within elite humanistic traditions.[67] In contemporary educational institutions, however, excellence has increasingly shifted toward organizational, societal, and networked paradigms, influenced by quality assurance, institutional branding, dissemination, and measurable performance.[68] The Medan case reflects this transition. Islamic school excellence is no longer limited to personal piety; it is also expressed through institutional reputation, alumni outcomes, curricular integration, and market trust. Yet this shift remains incomplete if excellence is reduced to branding and achievement. In a diverse society, excellence must include the capacity to deliberate, cooperate, and engage difference without hostility.

Civic competence offers a productive way to expand this model. Bentley argues that civic competence involves critical engagement with community norms while recognizing the need for authority, deliberation, and shared responsibility.[69] Castillo

[65]Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*.
[66]School A Alumni 2, "Interview with Alumni 2, School A" (Medan, North Sumatra, 2025).
[67]P Bagaric, "Criteria of Excellence in the Humanities," *Narodna Umjetnost* 54, no. 1 (2017): 69–86, https://doi.org/10.15176/vol54no104.
[68] Bagaric.
[69]R Bentley, "Political Disagreement and Socratic Civic Competence," *Political Studies* 53, no. 3 (2005): 516–36, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00542.x.

identifies four domains of civic competence—rights, virtues, responsibilities, and participation—that support community development, although these domains often develop unevenly in educational practice.[70] This is relevant to elite Islamic schools in Medan because students may learn respect and discipline, yet still need structured opportunities to exercise civic participation, ethical disagreement, and social responsibility across group boundaries. Bagaric's warning about the corruptions of civic life is also important: disagreement can be distorted into "disagonism," where difference is seen as confusion or wickedness, or into "eristicism," where disagreement becomes mere competitive argumentation.[71] Plural civic competence is therefore not simply about teaching tolerance, but about cultivating the maturity to encounter disagreement without moral panic or rhetorical aggression.

Educationally, this requires more than adding diversity slogans to school documents. Naval argues that education plays a central role in cultivating civic and social competences through formal, informal, and non-formal settings, including character education and integrated learning.[72] Innovative pedagogies such as cooperative learning and problem-based teaching have also been shown to support civic and social competence by linking classroom knowledge to real social problems.[73] For elite Islamic schools, this could take the form of intergroup social projects, reflective discussions on religious diversity, contextual Islamic

[70]L F Castillo, "Civic Competence as a Social Service Dimension: Context of a Local Community in the Philippines," *Journal of Social Service Research* 49, no. 4 (2023): 403–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2023.2232826.
[71]Bagaric, "Criteria of Excellence in the Humanities."
[72]C Naval, J L Villacís, and S Ibarrola-García, "The Transversality of Civic Learning as the Basis for Development in the University," *Education Sciences* 12, no. 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12040240.
[73]E Fernández Martín, "Analysis of Teaching Strategies, Supported in the Use of Ict, to Promote the Cooperative Learning of the University Student of the Degree of Pedagogy," *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formacion Del Profesorado* 34, no. 2 (2020): 79–100, https://doi.org/10.47553/rifop.v34i2.77628; S Fresneda and E Moros, "Critical Analysis of Competencies-Based Education from Polo's Thought," *Studia Poliana*, no. 23 (2021): 151–75, https://doi.org/10.15581/013.23.151-175.

ethics, community service with different social groups, and collaborative programs with schools or communities outside their immediate religious environment. Such practices would make plural civic literacy a lived educational experience rather than an abstract moral message.

Finally, rethinking excellence also requires moving beyond rigid individual metrics. Gravett argues that educational excellence should be understood through relational and fluid practices that foreground values and interconnectedness rather than narrow performance indicators.[74] Wariboko similarly defines excellence as the creative actualization of human potential for the common good, emphasizing participation, relationality, justice, and collective prosperity.[75] This perspective is especially relevant for Islamic schooling because Islamic ethics cannot be reduced to private discipline; it also involves responsibility toward others. The contribution of this study lies in showing that elite Islamic schools in Medan already possess strong foundations for pious achievement, but their future relevance depends on whether they can transform that achievement into plural civic competence. In a complex society, the most urgent measure of Islamic school excellence is not only how well students memorize sacred texts, obey moral rules, or compete academically, but how critically and ethically they receive, interpret, and embody religious literature in shared public life.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined religious literacy in selected elite Islamic schools in Medan by repositioning religious literature as the primary object of analysis. The findings show that religious literacy in these schools is not formed only through institutional routines such as Qur'anic recitation, tahfiz, congregational prayer, Islamic mentoring, and moral discipline, but more fundamentally through the selection, circulation, interpretation, and reception of

[74]K Gravett and I Kinchin, "Revisiting 'A "Teaching Excellence" for the Times We Live in': Posthuman Possibilities," *Teaching in Higher Education* 25, no. 8 (2020): 1028–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1807497.

[75]N Wariboko, *The Principle of Excellence: A Framework for Social Ethics*, *The Principle of Excellence: A Framework for Social Ethics*, 2009, https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-105020231786&partnerID=40&md5=05449e6881d3acf3a69b635fbda32478.

religious texts. Islamic textbooks, Qur'anic and Hadith materials, adab literature, student handbooks, school-produced modules, religious program documents, and digital Islamic resources function as textual instruments through which schools construct religious knowledge, moral authority, Islamic identity, and institutional excellence.

The study demonstrates that elite Islamic schools in Medan build their model of Islamic excellence through a textual regime that combines Qur'anic authority, moral discipline, adab formation, academic aspiration, and middle-class parental expectations. Religious books and school literacy materials do not merely support learning activities; they shape the normative imagination of the ideal Muslim student. Through these materials, students are encouraged to become Qur'an-oriented, morally disciplined, academically competitive, socially respectable, and loyal to Islamic values. In this sense, religious literature operates as a medium of identity formation as well as a mechanism for institutionalizing particular understandings of Islam, morality, and educational success.

At the same time, the study finds that civic plurality and interreligious understanding are not yet as strongly developed within the textual corpus as Qur'anic literacy, worship discipline, aqidah strengthening, and adab formation. Values such as tolerance, respect, and social responsibility appear in school documents and moral instruction, but they are often presented as general ethical attitudes rather than as systematic textual engagement with religious diversity, minority experience, intergroup relations, and plural citizenship. This suggests that the issue is not the absence of civic values, but the limited integration of plural civic competence into the religious literature and reading materials used by the schools.

The main contribution of this study lies in showing that elite Islamic schools should be understood not only as educational institutions, but also as sites of religious textual production, transmission, and reception. Theoretically, this study advances existing literature in three ways. First, it challenges characterizations of Islamic schooling that focus on institutional discipline or class aspiration without examining the textual regime

through which these dynamics are mediated. Second, it demonstrates that the concept of religious literacy requires extension beyond its dominant Western liberal framing to account for the practical-normative formation characteristic of Islamic schooling—while simultaneously showing the limits of that formation when measured against the demands of plural democratic society. Third, it introduces a "textual asymmetry" argument: the finding that civic plurality is not absent from but structurally subordinated within the textual regime of elite Islamic schools, which has implications for how scholars and practitioners understand the relationship between religious identity formation and civic competence. By placing religious literature at the center of analysis, this article expands the study of Islamic schooling into the field of Religious Literature of Indonesia/Nusantara—a scholarly designation referring to the corpus of Islamic textual production in the Indonesian-Malay world, encompassing classical texts, colonial-era adaptations, contemporary school materials, and digital Islamic content. It shows that Islamic identity and school excellence are constructed through textual practices: what texts are selected, how they are interpreted, which moral themes are emphasized, and how students receive these meanings in relation to their social environment. This perspective allows religious literacy to be understood as both a textual and social formation.

The scholarly and pedagogical implication of this study is that the textual orientation of religious literacy programs in Islamic schools constitutes a consequential educational variable—one that shapes not only students' Islamic formation but also their preparedness for civic participation. The study shows empirically that the existing textual corpus in the studied schools possesses openings for expansion: alumni interviews indicate that graduates themselves recognize the importance of social readiness and ethical engagement with difference, even where these were not strongly institutionalized during schooling. This suggests that the internal resources for deepening civic literacy are present within the Islamic tradition as practiced in these schools; what is needed is deliberate curricular design that connects adab, justice, and social responsibility to plural civic realities, rather than the addition of externally derived content. Such an approach would

allow Islamic schools to develop students who are textually grounded, socially reflective, and ethically capable of living responsibly in a diverse society—without requiring any dilution of Islamic identity or practice.

Future research should pursue at least three specific directions. First, longitudinal studies tracking alumni from elite Islamic schools in Medan across their university, workplace, and civic lives would test the long-term civic outcomes of the textual formation documented here—specifically whether alumni who received strong inward-oriented religious literacy develop plural civic competences through post-school experience, and under what conditions. Second, systematic critical discourse analysis of Islamic school textbooks and school-produced modules across different Indonesian urban contexts (Surabaya, Makassar, Yogyakarta) would establish whether the "textual asymmetry" identified in Medan is a feature of elite Islamic schooling nationally or is specific to Medan's particular demographic plurality. Third, dedicated study of digital Islamic learning content—YouTube channels, WhatsApp-circulated materials, mobile applications—is urgently needed, given that this study found references to digital Islamic resources in all three schools but could not fully analyze their content within the current scope; the digital textual regime may differ significantly from print-based materials in its construction of Islamic identity, authority, and civic awareness.

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