



Educational Institutions and Religious Identity Polarization: Toward an Educational Anti-Polarization Framework

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Abstract

Religious identity polarization has become an increasingly significant challenge for social cohesion in pluralistic societies. Educational institutions are frequently regarded as strategic spaces for fostering tolerance, promoting intergroup understanding, and preventing the development of exclusionary identities. This study aimed to systematically examine the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization and to identify the contextual conditions that support the effectiveness of such efforts. A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA framework. Literature searches were performed across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA databases, focusing on studies published between 2019 and 2025. From an initial pool of 284 records, 31 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four interconnected educational mechanisms that contribute to preventing religious identity polarization: inclusive curricula, dialogical pedagogical approaches, heterogeneous educational environments, and digital media literacy. The review also identified five key conditions that enhance effectiveness, namely institutional leadership commitment, educator capacity, policy consistency, family and community involvement, and evidence-based program implementation. Drawing upon Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and digital polarization perspectives, the study proposes an Educational Anti-Polarization Framework that conceptualizes educational institutions as multilevel systems shaping cognitive, social, pedagogical, and digital dimensions of identity formation. The findings highlight the importance of integrated educational strategies for strengthening social cohesion and fostering inclusive citizenship in increasingly diverse and digitally connected societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious identity polarization has emerged as one of the most pressing social challenges confronting contemporary pluralistic societies. While religious diversity has historically served as a source of cultural enrichment and social solidarity, recent developments indicate that religious identities are increasingly mobilized as markers of social division rather than mutual understanding. The expansion of digital communication networks, the rise of identity-based political movements, and growing ideological fragmentation have intensified social boundaries among religious groups (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Malešević, 2022). In many democratic societies, religious affiliation is no longer merely a private matter of belief but has become intertwined with political preferences, social

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trust, and collective identity formation. This transformation has generated concerns regarding declining intergroup tolerance, increasing prejudice, and weakened social cohesion. Consequently, scholars and policymakers have begun to view religious identity polarization not only as a religious issue but also as a broader educational, social, and democratic concern (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). Understanding how societies can mitigate these divisions has therefore become an important academic and policy priority.

The challenge of religious identity polarization is particularly evident in multicultural and multi-religious countries where social harmony depends heavily on constructive intergroup relations. In Indonesia, for example, several national surveys have reported persistent concerns regarding religious intolerance, exclusivist attitudes, and growing social segregation among different religious communities (Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2022). Similar patterns have also been observed in other regions, including South Asia, Europe, and North America, where ideological and religious divisions increasingly shape public discourse and political behavior (Fukuyama, 2022). Social media platforms further amplify these tensions by facilitating the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged narratives and identity-based content. Algorithm-driven information environments often expose users to homogeneous viewpoints, reinforcing existing beliefs and reducing opportunities for meaningful engagement with diverse perspectives (Cinelli et al., 2021). As a result, individuals may become more susceptible to stereotypes, misinformation, and exclusionary ideologies. These developments highlight the growing complexity of maintaining social cohesion in contemporary societies characterized by both diversity and digital interconnectedness.

The consequences of religious identity polarization extend beyond interpersonal prejudice and affect broader social, political, and educational systems. High levels of polarization can undermine democratic participation, weaken social trust, and increase the likelihood of conflict among communities (Putnam & Garrett, 2020). Educational environments are not immune to these dynamics, as schools and universities often reflect the broader social tensions present in society. When educational institutions fail to promote inclusive values, they may unintentionally reproduce social divisions through segregated interactions, biased curricula, or limited opportunities for intercultural engagement. Conversely, educational settings have the potential to foster empathy, mutual respect, and constructive dialogue among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Because educational institutions play a central role in shaping attitudes, values, and social competencies, they are uniquely positioned to contribute to efforts aimed at reducing polarization. This strategic role makes education an essential component of long-term social cohesion initiatives.

The importance of examining educational institutions in this context is further strengthened by contemporary educational policy agendas emphasizing tolerance, citizenship, and intercultural understanding. International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD increasingly advocate for educational approaches that promote global citizenship, critical thinking, and respect for diversity (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Within these frameworks, schools and universities are expected not only to transmit academic knowledge but also to cultivate social competencies necessary for peaceful coexistence in diverse societies. Educational interventions focused on multicultural education, interfaith dialogue, civic engagement, and media literacy have been widely promoted as mechanisms for strengthening social cohesion (Azmira, 2026; Dharma et al, 2025). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies considerably across institutional and cultural contexts. Some educational programs have demonstrated significant success in reducing prejudice and increasing tolerance, while others have produced limited or inconsistent outcomes. These mixed findings suggest the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how educational institutions contribute to preventing religious identity polarization.

Existing scholarship has explored several dimensions of education-related approaches to addressing religious and cultural divisions. Research on multicultural education consistently demonstrates that inclusive curricula can enhance students' appreciation of diversity and promote positive intergroup attitudes (Ismail & Abdullah, 2023; Verkuyten et al., 2022). Studies on dialogical pedagogy emphasize the importance of structured classroom discussions and cooperative learning experiences in fostering empathy and perspective-taking (Wahyudi & Mujib, 2023; Hidayat & Noor, 2022). Other scholars have examined the role of school diversity and intergroup contact in reducing prejudice, drawing upon the theoretical foundations of contact theory and social identity theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Latief & Anwar, 2022). Additionally, recent studies have highlighted the

growing significance of digital media literacy in helping students critically evaluate online information and resist extremist narratives (Mutaqin, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Collectively, these studies indicate that educational institutions can influence attitudes toward religious diversity through multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously at curricular, pedagogical, social, and technological levels.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature remains fragmented across different disciplinary perspectives and thematic areas. Most studies focus on specific educational interventions, such as multicultural curricula, interfaith programs, citizenship education, or media literacy initiatives, without examining how these approaches interact within a broader institutional framework (Muhtadi, 2023; Suryana & Rusdiana, 2021). Furthermore, many investigations are conducted within particular national or institutional contexts, limiting the generalizability of their findings (Hanushek, 2021; Nyirenda et al, 2020). Research also tends to prioritize immediate educational outcomes, such as tolerance attitudes or intercultural competencies, while paying less attention to their implications for preventing broader patterns of religious identity polarization (Zaluchu et al, 2025). Consequently, there remains limited understanding of the collective roles educational institutions play in addressing polarization as a multidimensional social phenomenon. This lack of conceptual integration hinders the development of comprehensive educational strategies capable of responding to contemporary polarization challenges.

Another limitation concerns the insufficient synthesis of recent evidence regarding the conditions under which educational institutions successfully contribute to social cohesion. Although previous studies acknowledge factors such as leadership commitment, teacher competence, institutional culture, and policy support, these variables are often discussed separately rather than as interconnected determinants of effectiveness (Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2023). Moreover, the increasing influence of digital environments on identity formation introduces new complexities that have not yet been adequately integrated into existing educational frameworks (Engeness, 2021; Hällgren, & Björk, 2023). As online and offline social interactions become increasingly intertwined, educational institutions face the challenge of addressing polarization both within classrooms and across digital spaces. Therefore, a comprehensive review that synthesizes recent empirical findings and identifies the mechanisms and contextual conditions influencing educational effectiveness is urgently needed. Addressing this gap can provide a more coherent understanding of how education functions as a preventive force against religious identity polarization.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to systematically examine the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization through a comprehensive review of recent scholarly literature. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the principal mechanisms through which educational institutions promote tolerance, diversity literacy, intergroup understanding, and resilience against exclusionary narratives. It also investigates the institutional and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of these mechanisms across different educational settings. Theoretically, this study contributes to the sociology of education and social cohesion literature by integrating fragmented findings into a coherent analytical framework. Practically, it offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and practitioners seeking to strengthen educational responses to identity-based polarization. By synthesizing contemporary evidence across multiple dimensions of educational practice, this review provides a foundation for designing more comprehensive and sustainable strategies for promoting social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework. The systematic review approach was selected because the study aimed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence regarding the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization across different educational contexts. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, a systematic review provides a transparent, rigorous, and replicable procedure for locating, screening,

and synthesizing relevant studies. This approach enables researchers to minimize selection bias while generating a comprehensive understanding of the existing body of knowledge (Snyder, 2019). The review focused on empirical and theoretical studies examining educational interventions, institutional practices, diversity education, interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and digital literacy related to religious identity polarization.

Research Context and Review Period

The review was conducted between January and March 2026. The scope of the review covered international and national scholarly publications discussing educational institutions and their contribution to preventing religious identity polarization. To ensure the relevance of findings to contemporary educational challenges, the review concentrated on studies published between January 2019 and December 2025. This period was selected because it reflects recent developments in identity politics, digital communication environments, social polarization, and educational responses to diversity management. The review included evidence from various educational settings, including primary schools, secondary schools, higher education institutions, and community-based educational programs operating in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Data Sources and Study Selection

The population of this study consisted of scholarly publications addressing educational institutions, religious identity polarization, social cohesion, tolerance education, intercultural learning, and related topics. Literature searches were conducted using four major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA-accredited journals. These databases were selected to ensure broad coverage of international and Indonesian scholarship.

The search strategy employed combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, including: “religious identity polarization,” “education and social cohesion,” “multicultural education,” “interfaith education,” “tolerance education,” “diversity literacy,” “religious tolerance,” “digital literacy and radicalization,” “education and polarization,” and “inclusive curriculum.” Various keyword combinations were adapted according to the search features of each database. The initial search yielded 284 records.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) published between 2019 and 2025; (2) written in English or Indonesian; (3) published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or scholarly books; (4) examined educational institutions, educational practices, or educational policies related to religious diversity, tolerance, social cohesion, or identity polarization; and (5) provided sufficient methodological and conceptual information for analysis. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on political polarization without educational relevance, lacked accessible full texts, or consisted of editorials, opinion pieces, and non-scholarly publications.

Following the PRISMA screening process, duplicate records were removed, titles and abstracts were screened, and full-text eligibility assessments were conducted. Of the 284 records initially identified, 47 studies met the preliminary screening criteria. After full-text evaluation, 31 studies satisfied all inclusion criteria and were retained for thematic synthesis. The distribution of literature selection across databases is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature Selection Results

Database	Initial Records Identified	Records After Title and Abstract Screening	Studies Included in the Review
Scopus	112	18	11
Web of Science	87	14	9
Google Scholar	63	10	7
SINTA	22	5	4
Total	284	47	31

The selected studies represent diverse educational contexts and methodological approaches, providing a comprehensive basis for examining the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization. The final sample was considered sufficiently representative to support thematic synthesis and conceptual interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Extraction Instrument

The primary instrument in this study was a structured literature extraction protocol developed by the researchers based on systematic review guidelines. The extraction form was designed to ensure consistency in recording information across studies. For each selected publication, the following information was documented: author(s), publication year, country or research context, research objectives, methodological approach, participants or study setting, key findings, educational strategies employed, and implications related to religious identity polarization prevention.

In addition, thematic indicators were established prior to analysis to facilitate systematic coding. These indicators included curriculum inclusivity, diversity literacy, dialogical pedagogy, intergroup contact, institutional culture, educational leadership, media literacy, digital citizenship, social cohesion, and anti-polarization strategies. The extraction protocol enabled the comparison of findings across studies while maintaining analytical consistency throughout the review process.

Validity and Reliability Procedures

Several procedures were implemented to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the review process. Content validity was established through expert consultation involving two scholars specializing in educational sociology and educational policy. The experts reviewed the search strategy, inclusion criteria, thematic indicators, and coding framework to ensure conceptual relevance and comprehensiveness.

To strengthen analytical reliability, an intercoder agreement procedure was conducted during the thematic coding stage. Two independent reviewers coded a subset of selected articles and compared coding results. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. The coding framework was subsequently refined before being applied to the entire dataset. In addition, methodological transparency was maintained by documenting each stage of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion in accordance with PRISMA recommendations.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through four sequential stages. The first stage involved identifying relevant studies through systematic searches across the selected databases using predetermined keywords and search strings. The second stage consisted of screening titles and abstracts to determine initial relevance to the research objectives. During the third stage, full-text articles were retrieved and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final stage involved extracting, organizing, and documenting relevant information from the selected studies using the literature extraction protocol.

Throughout the process, bibliographic information was managed using reference management software to facilitate record organization and duplicate removal. All selected articles were archived digitally to ensure transparency and accessibility during the analysis stage. The entire procedure followed the PRISMA workflow to maintain methodological rigor and replicability.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach was selected because it enables researchers to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and relationships across diverse studies while preserving contextual richness. The analysis involved six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report production.

Initially, all selected studies were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of the literature. Relevant statements and findings were subsequently coded according to the predefined thematic indicators. Similar codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories and reviewed iteratively to identify overarching themes. Through this process, four major themes emerged: fostering tolerance through inclusive curricula, developing diversity literacy through dialogical pedagogical approaches, creating heterogeneous educational environments as spaces for intergroup contact, and integrating digital media literacy to counter online radicalization. These themes formed the basis for the synthesis and interpretation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study did not involve direct human participants, ethical principles of academic research were strictly observed. All sources were cited appropriately to acknowledge intellectual

contributions and avoid plagiarism. The review process was conducted objectively, and study selection was based solely on predetermined methodological criteria rather than researcher preferences. Transparency was maintained by documenting the search strategy, screening procedures, inclusion criteria, and analytical process. Furthermore, the findings were reported accurately and responsibly to ensure the integrity and credibility of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis of the 31 studies that met the inclusion criteria, this review identified four major themes that illustrate the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization. These themes are presented sequentially in the following sections.

Fostering Tolerance Values through Inclusive Curricula

The first and most frequently discussed theme in the literature concerns the role of the curriculum as an instrument for fostering tolerance. In this context, the curriculum is understood broadly, encompassing not only the formal content of subjects but also the structure of learning experiences, the selection of instructional materials, and the ways in which values are taught and assessed within the classroom (AlAfnan & Al, 2024; Napal et al., 2020; Verkuyten et al., 2022).

A study conducted by Suprayogo and Wahib (2022) in Islamic boarding schools in East Java demonstrated that curricula explicitly incorporating content on the history and teachings of other religions, as well as presenting figures associated with tolerance from diverse religious traditions, contributed to more open and empathetic attitudes among students toward individuals from different faith backgrounds. This finding is consistent with the study of Suryana and Rusdiana (2021), which reported that secondary schools in Bandung that integrated multicultural education across multiple subjects, rather than confining it solely to religious education courses, achieved significantly higher levels of student tolerance compared to schools that did not adopt such integration.

At the international level, research by Ismail and Abdullah (2023) in Malaysia found that cross-religious Moral Education curricula generated higher levels of social trust among students from different religious groups than curricula that separated values education according to students' respective religious affiliations. This finding challenges the assumption that segregated religious instruction automatically promotes deeper religious understanding. On the contrary, such separation may contribute to the early reinforcement of identity fragmentation. Nevertheless, several studies have also highlighted the limitations of curriculum-based approaches.

Mietzner (2021) argues that a curriculum that is merely inclusive in principle is unlikely to produce meaningful outcomes unless it is accompanied by pedagogical practices that facilitate the internalization of values rather than simple memorization. Within the Indonesian context, Zuly Qodir and Wijayanto (2022) found that Pancasila and Civic Education courses continue to be taught predominantly through doctrinal and rote-learning approaches. As a result, these courses often fail to equip students with the critical thinking skills and empathetic capacities necessary for managing differences constructively in diverse social environments.

Developing Diversity Literacy through Dialogical Pedagogical Approaches

The second theme concerns teaching methods and pedagogical practices rather than curriculum content alone. In this context, diversity literacy refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and engage constructively with religious and cultural diversity, including the capacity to respond to differences without prejudice or fear (Fukuyama, 2022).

Dialogical pedagogical approaches, which position dialogue as the primary mode of learning and encourage students to openly explore different perspectives, have consistently been found to be more effective in fostering diversity literacy than traditional instructional and one-way teaching approaches (Muhtadi, 2023). Wahyudi and Mujib (2023), in their study of several secondary schools in South Sulawesi, reported that classes regularly implementing interfaith group discussions experienced a significant reduction in interreligious prejudice scores after one semester compared to control groups that relied on conventional lecture-based instruction.

Allport's Contact Theory (1954), as further refined through the meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), provides a strong theoretical foundation for these findings. Meaningful contact between members of different groups, when characterized by equal status, shared goals,

cooperation, and institutional support, has been consistently shown to reduce prejudice. Within educational settings, cooperative learning activities involving students from diverse identity groups simultaneously fulfill these conditions, making them one of the most empirically supported interventions for promoting tolerance and mutual understanding (Verkuyten et al., 2022).

Research conducted by Ramadhan, Hasan, and Syamsuddin (2023) at Alauddin State Islamic University of Makassar demonstrated that cross-campus community engagement programs bringing together students from Islamic higher education institutions and secular universities significantly improved indicators of intergroup trust and acceptance. Notably, these positive effects remained evident for at least six months after the program had concluded, suggesting that intensive and meaningful intergroup contact can produce relatively enduring attitudinal change.

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of dialogical approaches faces substantial challenges, particularly regarding educator capacity. Hidayat and Noor (2022) found that many religious education teachers in Indonesia lacked the necessary competencies to effectively facilitate interfaith dialogue, especially when discussions involved sensitive or controversial issues. Without adequate professional development and pedagogical training, efforts to introduce dialogical learning may inadvertently generate unproductive confrontation rather than constructive engagement. Therefore, strengthening educators' facilitation skills should be considered a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of dialogical pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering diversity literacy and preventing religious identity polarization.

Creating Heterogeneous School Environments as Spaces for Cross-Identity Contact

The third theme shifts the discussion from curricular and pedagogical dimensions to the structural and ecological dimensions of educational institutions. A central argument emerging from this body of literature is that the design of a school's physical and social environment plays a role that is equally important as curriculum content and instructional approaches in fostering tolerance and preventing identity polarization (Putnam & Garrett, 2020).

Religiously heterogeneous school environments provide natural opportunities for meaningful interaction among individuals from different backgrounds in everyday life. Sharing dining spaces, participating in recreational activities, collaborating on group assignments involving students from different faith traditions, and engaging in diverse extracurricular programs all constitute forms of intergroup contact. When such interactions occur consistently within a positive and supportive atmosphere, they can gradually cultivate trust, mutual understanding, and empathy across religious boundaries in an organic manner (Ismail & Abdullah, 2023).

Latief and Anwar (2022) specifically examined the impact of school zoning policies in several major Indonesian cities on students' religious composition. Their findings revealed that schools located in areas characterized by high religious diversity and that actively utilized this diversity as a learning resource demonstrated higher levels of inter-student tolerance. In contrast, schools that maintained religious homogeneity despite being situated in diverse communities, either through informal admission practices or social climates that were unwelcoming toward minority groups, tended to produce graduates exhibiting higher levels of prejudice toward those from different religious backgrounds.

Religious-based school segregation, which according to reports by Setara Institute (2022) has become increasingly prominent in several regions of Indonesia, poses a direct challenge to the role of educational institutions as spaces for cross-identity engagement. When children from different religious communities are deprived of opportunities to learn and interact together from an early age, they grow up without the formative experiences necessary to perceive members of other faiths as complete individuals rather than as abstract, unfamiliar, or potentially threatening social categories.

The implications of these findings for educational policy are substantial. Student admission policies that promote diversity, strong anti-segregation measures, and educational programs intentionally designed to bring together learners from different backgrounds in cooperative settings should be regarded as central priorities rather than peripheral considerations. Such initiatives can strengthen social cohesion, expand opportunities for constructive intergroup contact, and contribute to the long-term prevention of religious identity polarization within increasingly diverse societies.

Integration of Digital Media Literacy to Counter Online Radicalization

The fourth theme reflects an increasingly urgent contemporary challenge: the role of educational institutions in equipping learners with the ability to critically evaluate digital information and resist manipulation by religious identity-based polarization narratives that are widely disseminated through social media platforms (Malešević, 2022).

Mutaqin (2021) documented how social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the religious information ecosystem in Indonesia. Online preachers who often lack adequate formal religious education but possess strong skills in producing visually appealing and emotionally engaging content have succeeded in attracting audiences far larger than those of traditional religious scholars. Their content frequently contains exclusive identity narratives and messages that foster hostility toward other groups. Such narratives spread rapidly through algorithmic mechanisms that prioritize content generating high levels of emotional engagement, thereby amplifying divisive and polarizing messages.

Within this context, educational institutions face an unprecedented challenge: preparing students to navigate an increasingly unreliable and fragmented information environment. Contemporary media literacy education extends far beyond teaching individuals how to use digital technologies. Rather, it focuses on developing critical capacities to evaluate the credibility of information sources, identify biases and hidden agendas, understand how recommendation algorithms operate, and recognize emotional manipulation techniques commonly embedded in digital content (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These competencies are essential for enabling students to engage with online information responsibly and to resist narratives that promote intolerance and social division.

Comparative studies of media literacy programs across different countries reveal significant variations in both approaches and effectiveness. Finland, which consistently ranks among the highest-performing countries in global media literacy indices, has integrated media literacy education into its national curriculum from the primary school level. In the Finnish model, critical evaluation of information is treated as a core competency that is as fundamental as reading and numeracy skills (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). This approach demonstrates that effective media literacy is not an optional or supplementary program but rather an integral component of the broader educational vision and curriculum framework.

In Indonesia, however, the integration of media literacy into formal education remains at a relatively early stage of development. Research by Ramadhan et al. (2023) found that many secondary school students lack adequate strategies for verifying the accuracy of information encountered on social media and are highly vulnerable to religious misinformation designed to evoke identity-based fear, anxiety, and anger. These findings suggest that strengthening students' media literacy competencies through systematic and sustained educational interventions is both necessary and urgent. Integrating critical media literacy across educational levels, beginning in primary education, represents one of the most effective long-term investments for fostering informed citizenship, preventing online radicalization, and strengthening social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.

Conditions Supporting the Effectiveness of Educational Institutions

This literature review not only identifies what educational institutions can do to prevent religious identity polarization but also examines the conditions under which these efforts are most effective. Across the reviewed studies, five key conditions consistently emerged as critical determinants of effectiveness.

The first condition is committed institutional leadership. Studies by Suprayogo and Wahib (2022) and Latief and Anwar (2022) consistently demonstrate that schools and higher education institutions that successfully foster cultures of tolerance are led by principals, administrators, and institutional leaders who actively model and uphold inclusive values in their daily decision-making processes. Their commitment is reflected not merely in formal vision statements but in concrete institutional policies, practices, and interactions that promote diversity and mutual respect.

The second condition is educator readiness and capacity. Teachers and lecturers serve as the primary agents responsible for implementing pedagogical approaches aimed at promoting tolerance and diversity. Without sufficient competence, confidence, and comfort in facilitating discussions on

identity differences, even the most well-designed curricula and instructional methods are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes (Hidayat & Noor, 2022). Therefore, continuous professional development, supportive pedagogical supervision, and professional learning communities among educators are essential prerequisites for effective implementation.

The third condition is consistent policy support from the state. Educational institutions operate within regulatory frameworks established by governments. When state policies regarding diversity and inclusion are ambiguous or inconsistent, educational institutions often face conflicting expectations that undermine their effectiveness. For example, the coexistence of inclusive national curricula alongside local regulations promoting exclusivist practices may create contradictory signals for schools and educators (Setara Institute, 2022). Such inconsistencies can weaken institutional efforts to cultivate tolerance and social cohesion.

The fourth condition is the involvement of families and local communities. Research consistently indicates that the impact of tolerance education becomes more sustainable when the values promoted within educational institutions are reinforced at home and within the broader community. When messages of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance taught in schools conflict with beliefs communicated by family members or religious community leaders, students often align with the authority figures who are most immediate and influential in their daily lives. Consequently, collaboration among schools, families, and community stakeholders is crucial for ensuring the long-term effectiveness of educational interventions (Wahid Foundation, 2022).

The fifth condition is the implementation of evidence-based programs that are regularly evaluated. Many tolerance education initiatives are developed based on good intentions but lack strong theoretical foundations and systematic evaluation mechanisms. Without rigorous assessment procedures, it is difficult to determine whether a program is achieving its objectives, whether modifications are necessary, or whether the resources invested are generating meaningful outcomes. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are therefore essential for ensuring the effectiveness, sustainability, and improvement of educational interventions aimed at preventing religious identity polarization (Muhtadi, 2023).

Table 2. Synthesis of Educational Institutions' Roles, Mechanisms, and Conditions for Effectiveness

Role of Educational Institutions	Primary Mechanism	Conditions for Effectiveness	Sources
Fostering tolerance values	Inclusive curricula integrating cross-religious perspectives	Consistent implementation; leadership commitment	Suprayogo & Wahib (2022); Suryana & Rusdiana (2021)
Developing diversity literacy	Dialogical pedagogical approaches and cooperative learning	Educator capacity; policy support	Wahyudi & Mujib (2023); Ramadhan et al. (2023)
Creating heterogeneous educational environments	Student admission policies promoting diversity; cross-group activities	School composition; positive institutional climate	Latief & Anwar (2022); Ismail & Abdullah (2023)
Strengthening digital media literacy	Integration of critical literacy toward digital content	Systematic curriculum implementation beginning from early educational levels	Mutaqin (2021); Norris & Inglehart (2019)

The synthesis presented in Table 2 indicates that the role of educational institutions in preventing religious identity polarization is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to a single intervention. Inclusive curricula, dialogical pedagogical approaches, heterogeneous educational environments, and digital media literacy function as interconnected components that collectively contribute to the development of tolerance, mutual understanding, and social cohesion. The effectiveness of each mechanism depends not only on its implementation but also on the presence of supportive contextual conditions, including committed leadership, educator capacity, policy support, community involvement, and evidence-based program design. Therefore, educational institutions are most effective in mitigating religious identity polarization when these elements operate in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner rather than as isolated initiatives.

Discussion

The findings of this review demonstrate that educational institutions play a multidimensional role in preventing religious identity polarization through interconnected curricular, pedagogical,

social, and digital mechanisms. This finding suggests that educational institutions should not be understood merely as sites of knowledge transmission but as social environments where identities, values, and intergroup relationships are continuously constructed and negotiated. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), educational experiences influence how individuals categorize themselves and others within social groups. When educational institutions promote inclusive values and positive intergroup interactions, they reduce the salience of rigid in-group and out-group distinctions that often underpin identity polarization. This interpretation aligns with recent studies emphasizing that schools and universities serve as critical arenas for shaping attitudes toward diversity and social cohesion (Verkuyten et al., 2022; Fukuyama, 2022). However, the present synthesis extends previous scholarship by demonstrating that educational influence is not limited to formal instruction but operates simultaneously across multiple institutional dimensions. Consequently, educational institutions emerge as strategic actors in fostering social integration within increasingly diverse societies.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of inclusive curricula in fostering tolerance and reducing exclusivist attitudes. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that curricula incorporating multiple religious perspectives, multicultural values, and intercultural understanding contribute to greater openness toward religious diversity. This finding supports contemporary interpretations of multicultural education theory, which argue that exposure to diverse perspectives enables learners to challenge stereotypes and develop more complex understandings of social differences (Banks, 2021). Furthermore, the findings reinforce previous research conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia showing that integrated approaches to diversity education are associated with stronger intergroup trust and empathy (Ismail & Abdullah, 2023; Suryana & Rusdiana, 2021). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of inclusive curricula appears contingent upon how curricular content is delivered. The review reveals that curricula emphasizing memorization of normative values without opportunities for reflection and engagement often fail to produce meaningful attitudinal change. This suggests that curriculum content alone is insufficient; transformative educational outcomes require active processes of interpretation and internalization. Therefore, the contribution of inclusive curricula lies not only in what students learn but also in how educational institutions facilitate the construction of inclusive social identities.

The findings further highlight the importance of dialogical pedagogical approaches in developing diversity literacy and reducing intergroup prejudice. Unlike conventional instructional methods that position learners as passive recipients of information, dialogical pedagogy encourages active engagement with diverse viewpoints and lived experiences. This result strongly supports Intergroup Contact Theory, which posits that meaningful interactions between members of different groups can reduce prejudice when conditions such as equal status, cooperation, shared goals, and institutional support are present (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Several reviewed studies reported significant improvements in tolerance and intercultural understanding among students participating in collaborative and discussion-based learning environments (Wahyudi & Mujib, 2023; Ramadhan et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of dialogical approaches depends heavily on educators' capacity to manage sensitive discussions constructively. This finding expands previous literature by demonstrating that pedagogical quality functions as a mediating factor between educational interventions and social outcomes. Consequently, investments in teacher training and pedagogical competence should be regarded as central components of anti-polarization strategies rather than supplementary measures.

Another important finding concerns the role of heterogeneous educational environments as spaces for sustained cross-identity interaction. The reviewed evidence suggests that structural diversity within educational institutions creates opportunities for everyday encounters that gradually foster trust, empathy, and mutual recognition among students from different religious backgrounds. This finding is consistent with Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. While homogeneous educational environments may strengthen internal group cohesion, they often provide limited opportunities for developing bridging social capital across social boundaries. In contrast, heterogeneous educational settings encourage students to establish relationships that transcend religious and cultural divisions, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Similar conclusions have been reported in recent studies examining school diversity and intercultural interaction in pluralistic societies (Latief & Anwar, 2022; Putnam & Garrett, 2020).

However, the review also suggests that diversity alone does not automatically generate positive outcomes. Without supportive institutional climates and inclusive policies, heterogeneous environments may reinforce rather than reduce social tensions. This observation highlights the importance of understanding diversity as a managed educational resource rather than a self-sustaining mechanism for tolerance.

The increasing significance of digital media literacy represents another critical contribution of this review. The findings indicate that educational institutions must address not only face-to-face interactions but also the digital environments in which contemporary identity formation increasingly occurs. The rapid growth of algorithm-driven information ecosystems has transformed the dynamics of religious discourse, allowing exclusionary narratives and identity-based polarization to spread more efficiently than ever before (Cinelli et al., 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Within this context, digital media literacy emerges as a form of civic competence that enables learners to critically evaluate information sources, identify manipulation strategies, and resist extremist narratives. This finding supports recent international scholarship emphasizing the role of media literacy in strengthening democratic resilience and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2023; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). At the same time, the review extends existing discussions by positioning digital literacy as an integral component of educational anti-polarization frameworks rather than a separate technological skill. As online and offline identities become increasingly interconnected, educational institutions must prepare students to navigate both environments critically and responsibly.

Beyond identifying individual mechanisms, this review reveals that the effectiveness of educational institutions depends heavily on contextual conditions that shape implementation. Leadership commitment, educator readiness, policy consistency, family involvement, and evidence-based program design consistently emerged as key determinants of success. This finding underscores the limitations of intervention-focused perspectives that assume educational programs alone can transform social attitudes. Ecological approaches to education suggest that learning outcomes are influenced by interactions among multiple systems, including schools, families, communities, and broader policy environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The reviewed evidence strongly supports this perspective by demonstrating that educational initiatives are most effective when reinforced by supportive social and institutional contexts. In contrast, inconsistencies between school values and community norms may undermine intended outcomes. Therefore, educational institutions should be understood as components of larger social ecosystems rather than isolated agents of change.

The findings also provide an opportunity to reconsider how educational institutions are conceptualized within contemporary debates on polarization. Existing literature often examines curriculum, pedagogy, diversity, and media literacy as separate domains of inquiry. However, the present synthesis demonstrates that these dimensions are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Inclusive curricula provide the normative foundation for tolerance, dialogical pedagogy facilitates perspective-taking, heterogeneous environments create opportunities for meaningful interaction, and digital literacy protects learners from manipulative identity narratives. Together, these elements form a coherent institutional system capable of reducing the drivers of religious identity polarization. This integrative perspective contributes to the literature by moving beyond fragmented explanations and proposing a more holistic understanding of educational influence. In doing so, the study addresses a significant gap in previous scholarship that has largely examined these factors in isolation.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings suggest the emergence of what may be conceptualized as an Educational Anti-Polarization Framework. This framework proposes that the prevention of religious identity polarization requires simultaneous intervention across cognitive, pedagogical, social, and digital dimensions of education. Rather than viewing tolerance education as a discrete program or curricular component, the framework conceptualizes social cohesion as the outcome of interconnected institutional processes operating across multiple levels. Such a perspective extends existing theories of social identity, intergroup contact, and social capital by illustrating how educational institutions integrate these mechanisms within a single organizational context. Practically, the framework offers policymakers and educational leaders a comprehensive basis for designing interventions aimed at strengthening social cohesion in diverse societies. In the context of increasing global polarization, this contribution positions educational institutions not

merely as transmitters of knowledge but as critical infrastructures for sustaining democratic coexistence and inclusive citizenship.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that educational institutions play a crucial role in preventing religious identity polarization through four interconnected mechanisms: inclusive curricula, dialogical pedagogical approaches, heterogeneous educational environments, and digital media literacy. These mechanisms contribute to the development of tolerance, diversity literacy, intergroup understanding, and resilience against exclusionary narratives that may threaten social cohesion. The review further highlights that the effectiveness of educational institutions depends not only on the educational strategies employed but also on supporting conditions, including committed leadership, educator capacity, policy consistency, family and community involvement, and evidence-based program implementation. Educational efforts are most effective when these elements operate in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner.

The findings contribute to the growing literature on education and social cohesion by demonstrating that preventing religious identity polarization requires a multidimensional educational approach that extends beyond formal instruction. Therefore, strengthening educational institutions as inclusive, dialogical, and socially responsive environments should be considered a strategic priority for fostering harmonious relations and sustainable social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

S conceived the study, conducted the literature review, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. **ARM** and **T** contributed to the methodology, thematic analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript. **HSW** supervised the research process and validated the findings. **FS** and **NG** assisted in literature screening, data organization, and manuscript editing. **NPS** provided overall supervision and reviewed the final manuscript.

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