

TEACHERS AS SOFT-PREVENTION ACTORS: WASATIYYAH AND SCHOOL-BASED RESISTANCE TO YOUTH RADICALIZATION IN INDONESIA

Muhammad Faishol*¹, Wasino², Fakhruddin³, Asrori⁴
Department of Educational Management, Graduate School, Universitas Negeri
Semarang (UNNES), Indonesia
e-mail: muhammadfaishol92@students.unnes.ac.id

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*Corresponding author

Abstract

This study addresses the critical role of schools in early-stage prevention of youth radicalization, focusing on the underexplored domain of everyday pedagogical practices within Islamic Religious Education (IRE). It positions IRE teachers as key soft-prevention agents whose daily interactions and theological interpretations can build micro-level resilience among students. Employing a phenomenological approach, this research is based on fieldwork involving 26 IRE teachers in Banyuwangi, Indonesia, utilizing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings identify four core pedagogical strategies that constitute preventive practices: contextualizing sacred texts, character-focused instruction, modeling inclusive behavior, and engaging with the wider community. While these strategies generate significant resilience mechanisms capable of interrupting early radicalization pathways, their effectiveness is moderated by structural constraints, including limited professional development, inequitable access to certification, and ideological contradictions within schools and communities. By integrating the Islamic ethical concept of wasatiyyah (moderation) with established radicalization frameworks, this study contributes to scholarly debates on culturally embedded prevention and specifies the institutional conditions necessary for teacher agency to effectively support resilience-building in plural societies. This article draws on data from a broader phenomenological study of IRE teachers' practices in Banyuwangi, but specifically analyzes their role in preventing radicalization through the lens of wasatiyyah and soft prevention frameworks.

Keywords: *Preventing Violent Extremism; Soft Prevention; Islamic Religious Education; Wasatiyyah; Youth Radicalization.*



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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran kritis sekolah dalam pencegahan dini radikalisasi pemuda, dengan fokus pada ranah praktik pedagogis sehari-hari dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) yang masih kurang dieksplorasi. Studi ini memposisikan guru PAI sebagai agen pencegahan lunak (soft-prevention) kunci, yang melalui interaksi sehari-hari dan interpretasi teologis dapat membangun ketahanan (resilience) mikro di kalangan peserta didik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis, penelitian ini didasarkan pada kerja lapangan yang melibatkan 26 guru PAI di Banyuwangi, Indonesia, melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan mengidentifikasi empat strategi pedagogis inti yang membentuk praktik pencegahan: (1) kontekstualisasi teks suci, (2) pembelajaran berfokus pada karakter, (3) pemodelan perilaku inklusif, dan (4) keterlibatan dengan komunitas luas. Meskipun strategi-strategi ini menghasilkan mekanisme ketahanan yang signifikan dan mampu menginterupsi jalur radikalisasi dini, efektivitasnya dimoderasi oleh kendala struktural, termasuk pengembangan profesional yang terbatas, akses sertifikasi yang tidak merata, serta kontradiksi ideologis di dalam sekolah dan komunitas. Dengan mengintegrasikan konsep etika Islam wasatiyyah (moderasi) ke dalam kerangka teori radikalisasi yang mapan, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada perdebatan akademis mengenai pencegahan yang tertanam secara kultural dan merinci kondisi kelembagaan yang diperlukan agar agensi guru dapat secara efektif mendukung dalam masyarakat majemuk.

Kata Kunci: *Pencegahan Ekstremisme Kekerasan; Pencegahan Lunak; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Wasatiyyah; Radikalisasi Pemuda.*

INTRODUCTION

The global resurgence of violent extremism among youth has become one of the most pressing security and social challenges of the twenty-first century. From London and Paris to Jakarta and Surabaya, young people have been both perpetrators and victims of terrorist attacks inspired by radical ideologies. This phenomenon has prompted scholars and policymakers to shift from reactive, security-centric approaches toward preventive strategies that address the root causes of radicalization before they escalate into violence (García et al., 2025). Within this preventive turn, educational institutions have emerged as critical sites for intervention, given their role in shaping identity, values, and worldviews during adolescence, a period of heightened vulnerability to simplistic and absolutist narratives (Firth, 2026; Lopez, 2026; Muhsin et al., 2024; Savage et al., 2023).

Traditional counter-terrorism approaches, such as surveillance, deradicalization programs, and security operations, have proven necessary but insufficient. They address individuals already radicalized but fail to prevent the gradual cognitive opening that precedes violent commitment (Milano-bicocca, 2020). This limitation has given rise to the concept of soft prevention: non-coercive, educational, and community-based efforts that build psychological and social resilience against extremist narratives (Ahmad, 2024; Akintayo, 2024; Saraiva & Erfe, 2023). Soft prevention operates through everyday institutions, such as families, religious communities, and schools, where young people's interpretive habits, ethical reasoning, and social identities are formed. Yet, despite policy enthusiasm for educational approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), empirical research on how teachers actually enact soft prevention in ordinary classrooms remains scarce (Kadir et al., 2025).

Radicalization is not a sudden event but a gradual process involving complex psychological and social mechanisms. (Mccauley & Moskalenko, 2014) two-pyramid model distinguishes between cognitive radicalization (adopting extremist beliefs) and behavioral radicalization (engaging in violent action), highlighting how individual grievances, group dynamics, and moral disengagement interact to produce radical trajectories. (Moccia, 2020) emphasize the role of significance quest, the need for personal meaning and recognition, which extremists exploit by offering narratives that frame violence as heroic and meaningful. (Hardie-bick, 2016) uncertainty-identity theory explains how feelings of uncertainty about one's identity and place in the world increase attraction to groups with rigid ideologies and clear boundaries. These mechanisms suggest that effective prevention must address not only ideological content but also the psychological vulnerabilities that make extremist narratives appealing.

Within this psychosocial framework, religious education teachers occupy a uniquely strategic position. They engage with students on questions of meaning, identity, and moral obligation, precisely the domains that radicalizing narratives exploit. In Muslim-majority contexts, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers are entrusted with transmitting scriptural knowledge while also shaping students' dispositions toward religious difference, authority, and civic belonging (Maulana & Wijaya, 2025). When students encounter extremist interpretations online or in their communities, IRE teachers are often the first authority figures who can offer alternative, contextual readings of sacred texts. Yet, the literature has paid little attention to how these teachers operationalize prevention in everyday practice, or how Islamic theological resources, such as the concept of wasatiyyah (moderation,

balance), might be mobilized as culturally legitimate tools for counter-radicalization.

Wasatiyyah, derived from the Qur'anic description of Muslims as *ummatan wasatan* (Rauf, 2019), encapsulates values of balance, justice, moderation, and avoidance of extremism (*ghuluw*). In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, wasatiyyah has been adopted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as the conceptual foundation for its *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) policy (RI, 2019). The policy articulates four indicators: national commitment, tolerance, rejection of violence, and accommodation of local culture. While scholars have examined wasatiyyah as a theological doctrine or policy discourse (Sina, 2025), few have investigated how it is actually taught, interpreted, and enacted by teachers in ways that directly counter radicalizing influences. This gap is significant because wasatiyyah offers an indigenous, theologically grounded framework for prevention, one that may be more credible and effective than imported or securitized PVE modules.

Indonesia's recent history provides ample reason for concern about youth radicalization. Between 2000 and 2020, the country experienced dozens of terrorist attacks, many perpetrated by young Indonesians radicalized through online networks, study circles, or personal contacts (Manthovani, 2023). Surveys indicate that intolerant attitudes and sympathy for extremist groups persist among students and teachers in some schools (Jakarta, 2018). The rise of digital religiosity, where young Muslims access religious content through YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, has amplified exposure to exclusivist narratives presented by charismatic but uncredentialed preachers (Laksana, 2025). In this volatile ecology, schools are not neutral spaces but contested arenas where moderate, radical, and ambiguous messages compete for students' allegiance. Teachers who promote wasatiyyah must therefore navigate not only curricular demands but also contradictory influences from families, peers, and online sources.

Existing research on PVE in Indonesian education has focused on curriculum design, textbook analysis, or state-led deradicalization programs (Hidayat et al., 2025). Few studies have examined how IRE teachers enact prevention through routine pedagogical practices, and even fewer have theorized these practices in relation to established radicalization frameworks. Moreover, while the concept of wasatiyyah is frequently invoked in policy documents, its operationalization in classroom teaching remains undertheorized. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following questions: (1) What pedagogical strategies do IRE teachers in Banyuwangi employ as forms of soft prevention against youth

radicalization? (2) How do these strategies draw upon and enact the concept of wasatiyyah? (3) What institutional conditions enable or constrain teachers' preventive agency?

This article draws on data from a broader phenomenological inquiry into the professional practices of IRE teachers in Banyuwangi, East Java. A companion study (Faishol et al., forthcoming) examines teachers' enactment of interreligious learning and pedagogical deep learning within the framework of Indonesia's religious moderation policy. The present analysis shifts focus specifically to counter-radicalization, re-examining the same dataset through a distinct analytical lens sensitized by radicalization theories and the concept of wasatiyyah. While the empirical foundation is shared, the research questions, theoretical framework, coding scheme, and interpretation are fundamentally different. Although drawing on the same empirical foundation, the two studies address distinct research problems and should be evaluated as separate scholarly contributions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design oriented specifically toward understanding how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers perceive and enact their roles as soft-prevention actors against youth radicalization. The data presented in this article are drawn from a broader phenomenological inquiry into the professional practices of IRE teachers in Banyuwangi, East Java. Unlike a separate study on interreligious learning using the same research context (Faishol et al., forthcoming), the present investigation applies a different theoretical lens radicalization theory (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014) and the concept of wasatiyyah to identify and theorize teachers' pedagogical strategies as forms of soft prevention.

Banyuwangi has a documented history as both a source and a site of youth radicalization. Between 2015 and 2020, the National Counterterrorism Agency identified the regency as having high vulnerability to extremist recruitment, including its link to the 2018 Surabaya bombings ([Kompas.com](https://www.kompas.com), 2018; [Detik.com](https://www.detik.com), 2018). Banyuwangi was purposively selected as the research site due to its complex socio-religious landscape, which presents both opportunities and challenges for deradicalization efforts. While officially recognized for its cultural diversity, the regency has also been historically exposed to networks of religious conservatism and, in some areas, has witnessed the proliferation of exclusivist narratives among youth, often amplified through social media (Wardi et al., 2023). This coexistence of pluralism and radical potential

makes Banyuwangi a revelatory case for examining how IRE teachers navigate their preventive roles in a contested environment.

Twenty-six IRE teachers from public senior high schools (SMA) and vocational high schools (SMK) across Banyuwangi were recruited through purposive sampling. The sample was designed to capture variation in teaching experience, school environments, and prior exposure to students exhibiting intolerant or radical views. Participants included 18 male and 8 female teachers, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 28 years. They served in schools located in both urban and rural sub-districts of Banyuwangi, representing diverse institutional contexts: some schools had established reputations for inclusive practices, while others were situated in areas where conservative influences were more pronounced. All informants taught at schools with varying degrees of student exposure to online extremist content, as reported during interviews, although none had received formal PVE training at the time of the study.

Data were gathered between July and December 2024 through two interview sessions per teacher (total 90-150 minutes). The first session (60-90 minutes) explored general experiences with students' religious questions and strategies for addressing intolerant views. The second session (30-60 minutes), conducted 1-2 weeks later, focused specifically on critical incidents classroom moments where a student's comment indicated potential radicalizing influence. Key probes included: 'Can you describe a specific time when a student said something that concerned you regarding religious extremism?' and 'What did you say or do in that moment walk me through it step by step.' To reduce social desirability bias a known challenge in PVE research (Feddes, 2020) we assured participants of non-evaluative intent and framed questions about 'challenges' before 'successes.' Non-participant classroom observations (2-4 hours per teacher) were conducted using a structured field note protocol distinguishing between (a) verbatim teacher/student speech, (b) non-verbal interactions, and (c) observer's reflective memos. Document analysis included three categories: (a) lesson plans (RPP) for lessons on jihad, relations with non-Muslims, or Islamic governance; (b) school policies addressing religious moderation; and (c) national PAI textbooks for grades 10-12, analyzed for framing of extremism. All participants provided informed consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Negeri Semarang.

All interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were re-analyzed specifically for this article. The analysis proceeded through three stages of coding, sensitized by the conceptual framework of radicalization

(Mccauley & Moskalenko, 2014) and the concept of wasatiyyah. First, open coding combined inductive codes with deductive codes derived from radicalization theory: 'disruption of literalist reading,' 'dehumanization interruption,' and 'alternative significance quest.' Second, axial coding grouped these initial codes into categories that reflected the mechanisms of soft prevention (e.g., "countering literalist interpretations," "building empathy"). Third, selective coding integrated these categories into the four core preventive strategies and three structural constraints presented in the findings. Triangulation across multiple data sources and member checking with eight participants enhanced the validity of the interpretations.

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources, member checking, and reflexive journaling to bracket researcher assumptions. The first author, a former PAI teacher, maintained a reflexive journal documenting how his professional background shaped engagement with participants. Regular peer debriefing with co-authors who are not former PAI teachers provided critical scrutiny. A limitation of this study is its reliance on teacher reports and classroom observations without direct longitudinal tracking of students' ideological trajectories. Therefore, while we can identify teachers' preventive strategies, we cannot definitively measure their long-term impact on preventing radicalization. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of discussing extremism may have led some teachers to present socially desirable responses, a common challenge in PVE research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Field data reveal that Islamic Religious Education teachers in Banyuwangi employ four interconnected pedagogical strategies that function as soft prevention against youth radicalization. These strategies contextualizing sacred texts, character-centered pedagogy, role-modeling inclusive behavior, and community engagement are not formally designated as PVE interventions in policy documents. Rather, they emerge from teachers' everyday professional practice, informed by their understanding of wasatiyyah and their lived experience in plural classrooms. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is mediated by three structural constraints: limited professional development, inequitable access to certification, and ideological contradictions within the school environment. Together, these findings illuminate how teachers translate the abstract ideal of religious

moderation into concrete preventive practices, while also revealing the fragility of teacher-led prevention in the absence of systemic support.

The first and most frequently articulated strategy involves teachers' deliberate efforts to guide students away from literalist or decontextualized readings of Qur'anic verses and Hadith. Teachers consistently reported that students increasingly encounter religious content through social media platforms where charismatic but uncredentialed preachers present verses in isolation, stripped of historical context and scholarly interpretation. This exposure creates a vulnerability that radicalizing narratives exploit: the simplification of complex religious texts into absolute, actionable commands. One teacher from SMAN 1 Muncar described his approach when students bring such content into classroom discussions:

"When students bring verses from TikTok or Instagram and they think they already understand them, I have to explain the context. It cannot be accepted just like that. I ask, who delivered it? In what situation was this verse revealed? What was its purpose? So that they do not immediately use the verse to justify their own opinions."
(G16)

This pedagogical move asking about the source, the historical circumstances (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and the intended purpose of revelation functions as what (Mccauley & Moskalenko, 2014) term a disruption of cognitive radicalization. By introducing complexity and context, teachers prevent the premature closure of meaning that characterizes absolutist thinking. Another teacher illustrated how this plays out with sensitive topics such as political leadership:

"There was a student who said, 'Sir, according to a preacher on YouTube, non-Muslims cannot be elected as leaders.' I asked, 'Do you know the background of that sermon? Who was the audience? What was the context?' Finally, I explained that there are universal verses and contextual verses. We have to look at both." (G16)

Importantly, teachers framed this not as undermining religious authority but as restoring it to its proper place. They emphasized that classical Islamic scholarship itself provides the tools for contextual interpretation, and that extremism often arises precisely from abandoning these scholarly traditions. This aligns with Sahin's (Sahin, 2018) observation that Islamic education's potential for critical engagement is realized when teachers position themselves as facilitators of interpretation rather than mere transmitters of doctrine.

Beyond textual interpretation, teachers emphasized the preventive power of character education the cultivation of empathy, honesty, responsibility, and social awareness. They argued that students who have internalized these dispositions are

less susceptible to the dehumanization of others that extremist narratives require. As one teacher from SMAN 1 Cluring explained:

"I always emphasize to the children that religion is not just about prayer and recitation. But how we treat friends who are of different ethnicities, different opinions. If we are harsh towards a friend, even though he is also Muslim, that does not reflect good character. Even more so towards those of different religions." (G15)

This approach resonates with the concept of cognitive complexity identified in PVE literature as a protective factor against radicalization (Feddes, 2020). Students who learn to navigate multiple perspectives, to hold nuance, and to resist binary thinking develop psychological resources that make them less likely to embrace simplistic "us versus them" narratives. Teachers operationalized character education through a variety of classroom practices. Reflective journaling, small-group collaboration, and ethical dilemma discussions were common. One teacher from SMKN 1 Banyuwangi described how character values are embedded in daily routines:

"Teaching honesty or empathy is part of preventing radicalism. Students learn that religion is not only about ritual but about living with others." (G03)

The connection to wasatiyyah here is explicit. Teachers framed moderation not merely as a set of doctrinal positions but as a mode of being in the world a balanced, reflective, and socially engaged disposition. This echoes the Qur'anic concept of *ummaman wasatan* (a middle nation), which emphasizes justice, balance, and witness to humanity.

Teachers consistently identified their own conduct as the most powerful, and most visible, form of soft prevention. They recognized that students observe not only what they say in the classroom but how they behave in corridors, staff rooms, and school grounds. When teachers model respect for difference, patience in disagreement, and genuine curiosity about others, they provide a living template for students to emulate. One teacher from SMKN Darul Ulum Muncar stated:

"If I show respect to non-Muslim students, they see that moderation is real." (G17)

Another teacher from SMAN 1 Tegaldlimo described his deliberate efforts to demonstrate respect for non-Muslim colleagues:

"I cannot only talk about tolerance in class, but outside the class I myself do not respect non-Muslim teachers. Children are observant, they see. So I deliberately every Friday, after prayer, I take the time to greet the non-Muslim teachers. Just 'good morning, how are you?' It is small but impactful." (G20)

A teacher from SMAN 1 Gambiran extended this principle to interfaith events, attending ceremonies of other religious communities as a gesture of solidarity and respect:

"When there is a Hindu religious event at school, I attend. I sit at the back, I do not participate in the rituals, but my presence shows that we respect each other. Other teachers and students see that." (G14)

This form of role-modeling addresses what Hogg's (Hogg, 2014) uncertainty-identity theory identifies as a key driver of radicalization: the need for clear group boundaries and ingroup affirmation. When teachers embody a vision of Islamic identity that is secure enough to engage with others without anxiety, they offer students an alternative to the defensive, boundary-hardening identities that extremist groups promote. As one teacher succinctly put it, "If we are confident in our religion, we do not need to be afraid to associate with anyone."

While the first three strategies focus primarily on the school environment, teachers also recognized that prevention cannot be contained within school walls. Students carry home the values learned at school, but they also encounter competing messages from parents, neighborhood religious figures, and online networks. Several teachers described efforts to extend their influence into the broader community, recognizing that prevention becomes more credible when reinforced by families and local authorities. One teacher from SMKN 1 Kalipuro explained:

"We cannot work alone. If parents teach something different, students become confused. The community must also hear the message of moderation." (G09)

Another teacher from SMAN 1 Bangorejo described his approach to engaging parents:

"We cannot work alone. Parents at home sometimes have different understandings. So every time there is a parent meeting, I informally convey the importance of protecting children from extremist content on social media. I give examples, 'Fathers, mothers, please pay attention to what children watch on YouTube. Do not let them be exposed to harsh sermons.'" (G26)

Others described collaboration with local religious leaders (*kyai*) to harmonize messages about sensitive concepts such as jihad, tolerance, and relations with non-Muslims:

"I also coordinate with kyai in the villages. Sometimes children receive rather harsh sermons from outside. I communicate with the local kyai, 'Sir, please help, there are children who might need their understanding corrected.' Such cooperation is important." (G26)

These outreach efforts, while promising, remain uneven and heavily dependent on individual teachers' initiative. No systematic institutional framework supports such engagement, and teachers reported hesitancy about being perceived as promoting a government agenda in politically sensitive contexts. A teacher from SMAN 1 Gambiran noted:

"Sometimes people think we are bringing a political agenda if we talk too much about moderation. So we have to be careful." (G14)

Despite their demonstrated commitment, nearly all teachers identified structural constraints that render their efforts fragile and conditional. The most frequently cited constraint was the inadequacy of professional development specifically focused on preventing extremism and responding to radicalization risks. This training deficit leaves teachers to rely on personal experience, informal learning, and their own theological commitments. While many have developed effective strategies through trial and error, the absence of systematic capacity-building creates uneven implementation and leaves less experienced teachers without adequate preparation for the complexities they may face. One teacher from SMAN 1 Wongsorejo explained:

"I have only participated in moderation training once. And that was just a representative, not all PAI teachers. Whereas if we want to prevent radicalism, all teachers must understand. Not just those who are assigned." (G10)

This training deficit is particularly consequential for prevention because teachers lack exposure to up-to-date knowledge about evolving extremist narratives, digital recruitment strategies, and effective pedagogical responses. Without systematic capacity-building, teachers must rely on intuition and personal experience, leaving them ill-equipped to recognize early warning signs or to design counter-narratives that resonate with students' online experiences.

A second, and intensely felt, constraint concerns the delayed and inequitable access to the *Pendidikan Profesi Guru* (PPG) certification program for PAI teachers. The metaphor "stepchild" (*anak tiri*) encapsulates a structure of feeling: PAI teachers are simultaneously inside the educational system, subject to its mandates, and outside its circuits of professional recognition and career advancement. This structural marginalization has direct consequences for prevention. As one teacher observed, PPG provides not only financial benefits but also access to updated knowledge, peer learning, and professional networks all essential for staying current with the evolving landscape of extremist narratives. A teacher from SMAN 1 Purwoharjo shared a similar experience:

"I have taken the PPG pre-test since 2022. Until now, I have not been called. Friends from other subjects have already finished. This makes us feel like stepchildren. Whereas to improve competence, especially in dealing with radicalism issues, we really need PPG." (G18)

The delay in certification not only affects teachers' career advancement but also deprives them of structured opportunities to develop the specialized competencies required for soft prevention. PPG programs typically include modules on contemporary issues, including radicalization, which are essential for teachers to stay current. When PAI teachers are excluded from these pathways, their ability to function as effective preventive agents is systematically undermined.

A third constraint, perhaps the most insidious, concerns ideological contradictions within the school itself. Several teachers described colleagues both within and outside the IRE department who displayed intolerant or exclusionary attitudes, undermining the coherence of moderation messages. One teacher from SMAN 1 Srono recounted:

"It is difficult when another teacher in the same school says the flag is haram or mocks others' worship. Our messages of moderation lose credibility." (G21)

Such contradictions expose students to competing moral authorities, producing an environment in which preventive efforts must operate amid institutional ambiguity. Instead of functioning as unified moral communities, schools appear as contested spaces where multiple ideological currents coexist some reinforcing, others directly contradicting, moderation-oriented pedagogy. The same teacher elaborated:

"Sometimes we have already explained about tolerance, but in the teachers' room, there is another teacher who speaks harshly about other religions. Or a teacher who does not want to participate in the flag ceremony because they say it is 'shirk'. This confuses the children. PAI teachers have to explain again, but it is difficult when other teachers themselves do not set an example." (G21)

These structural constraints are consistent with those documented in a companion study on interreligious learning (Faishol et al., forthcoming), confirming that PAI teachers face systemic marginalization regardless of pedagogical focus. However, the present analysis reveals that these constraints have distinct implications for soft prevention, as they limit teachers' capacity to respond to radicalizing influences in ways that generic professional development cannot address.

Table 1. Summary of Findings: Strategies and Constraints

Theme	Core Phenomenological Structure	Representative Quotations
Contextualizing Sacred Texts	Teachers guide students away from literalist readings by introducing historical context	<i>"When students bring verses from TikTok or Instagram and they think they already understand them, I have</i>

	and scholarly interpretation	<i>to explain the context. It cannot be accepted just like that. I ask, who delivered it? In what situation was this verse revealed? What was its purpose? So that they do not immediately use the verse to justify their own opinions." (G16)</i>
Character-Centered Pedagogy	Cultivation of empathy, honesty, and social awareness as protective factors against dehumanization	<i>"I always emphasize to the children that religion is not just about prayer and recitation. But how we treat friends who are of different ethnicities, different opinions. If we are harsh towards a friend, even though he is also Muslim, that does not reflect good character. Even more so towards those of different religions." (G15)</i>
Role-Modeling Inclusive Behavior	Teachers' own conduct as the most visible form of prevention; embodying respect for difference	<i>"If I show respect to non-Muslim students, they see that moderation is real." (G17) "When there is a Hindu religious event at school, I attend. I sit at the back, I do not participate in the rituals, but my presence shows that we respect each other. Other teachers and students see that." (G14)</i>
Community Engagement	Extending preventive efforts beyond school walls through parental outreach and collaboration with local religious leaders	<i>"We cannot work alone. If parents teach something different, students become confused. The community must also hear the message of moderation." (G09)</i>
Limited Professional Development	Inadequate training on preventing extremism; reliance on personal experience and informal learning	<i>"I have only participated in moderation training once. And that was just a representative, not all PAI teachers. Whereas if we want to prevent radicalism, all teachers must understand. Not just those who are assigned." (G10)</i>
Inequitable Certification Access	Delayed and separate PPG pathway for PAI teachers; feeling of being treated as "stepchildren"	<i>"I have taken the PPG pre-test since 2022. Until now, I have not been called. Friends from other subjects have already finished. This makes us feel like stepchildren. Whereas to improve competence, especially in dealing with radicalism issues, we really need PPG." (G18)</i>
Ideological Contradictions	Intolerant attitudes among colleagues undermining coherence of moderation messages	<i>"It is difficult when another teacher in the same school says the flag is haram or mocks others' worship. Our messages of moderation lose credibility." (G21) "Sometimes we</i>

have already explained about tolerance, but in the teachers' room, there is another teacher who speaks harshly about other religions. Or a teacher who does not want to participate in the flag ceremony because they say it is 'shirk'. This confuses the children. PAI teachers have to explain again, but it is difficult when other teachers themselves do not set an example."
(G21)

Discussion

This study investigated how Islamic Religious Education teachers in Banyuwangi enact soft prevention against youth radicalization through everyday pedagogical practices. The findings reveal that teachers mobilize the Islamic concept of wasatiyyah as a theological and ethical resource, translating it into four interconnected strategies: contextual interpretation, character-centered pedagogy, role-modeling, and community engagement. These strategies, while not formally designated as PVE interventions, directly address the psychological and social mechanisms that radicalizing narratives exploit.

The findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship examining how indigenous religious concepts can serve as culturally legitimate resources for PVE (Hakim, 2022). Teachers in this study did not merely reference wasatiyyah as an abstract doctrine; they operationalized it through specific pedagogical practices. When teachers guide students to consider historical context before applying a verse, they enact the wasatiyyah principle of *tawazun* (balance) balancing textual literalism with contextual reality. When they cultivate empathy and social responsibility, they enact *i'tidal* (justice and uprightness) the ethical disposition that prevents the dehumanization of others. When they model inclusive behavior, they enact *tasamuh* (tolerance) not as passive acceptance but as active, embodied respect.

This operationalization matters because it addresses a persistent challenge in PVE programming: the tendency to import secular, Western-derived frameworks that may lack credibility in Muslim-majority contexts (Reidy, 2018). Wasatiyyah, by contrast, is rooted in Islamic tradition and resonates with teachers' professional identities and communities' expectations. As one teacher noted, "I don't need to explain wasatiyyah as Western theory. It's from the Qur'an, from hadith. So it's easier to accept."

The four strategies identified in this study can be mapped onto established radicalization frameworks, clarifying how they function as micro-level prevention mechanisms. Drawing on McCauley and Moskalenko's (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) two-pyramid model, we can distinguish between cognitive radicalization (adopting extremist beliefs) and behavioral radicalization (engaging in violent action). The strategies observed here primarily target the cognitive pyramid the gradual shift in beliefs and attitudes that precedes and enables violent action.

Contextual interpretation directly counters the simplification of identity and doctrine that characterizes extremist thought. When teachers introduce complexity, historical specificity, and scholarly debate, they prevent the premature closure of meaning that absolutist narratives require. This addresses what (Feddes, 2020) term the "significance quest" the need for personal meaning and recognition. Extremist groups exploit this need by offering clear, simple narratives that promise significance through heroic action. By offering an alternative significance through understanding, through ethical conduct, through respectful engagement teachers provide a competing pathway to meaning.

Character-centered pedagogy cultivates empathy and cognitive complexity, directly addressing the dehumanization of outgroups that extremist narratives promote (Loon et al., 2024). When students learn to see others as complex human beings with legitimate perspectives, they become less susceptible to the binary "us versus them" framing that radicalizing discourses rely on. This aligns with Feddes, Mann, and Doosje's (Feddes, 2020) finding that interventions increasing cognitive complexity and empathy reduce radicalization risk.

Role-modeling inclusive behavior addresses the social dimension of radicalization the attraction to groups that offer clear boundaries and strong ingroup affirmation (Hogg, 2014). When teachers embody a confident, open Islamic identity that does not require the denigration of others, they offer an alternative model of belonging. Students observe that one can be deeply committed to Islam while maintaining genuine, respectful relationships with those of other faiths.

Community engagement, though unevenly practiced, addresses the crucial need for coherence across the multiple contexts students inhabit. As radicalization research has long emphasized, vulnerability increases when individuals receive contradictory messages from different social spheres (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). By reaching out to parents and local religious leaders, teachers attempt to align the messages students receive at school with those they encounter at home and in the community.

While these findings demonstrate that IRE teachers can and do function as soft-prevention actors, they also reveal the fragility of teacher-led prevention. The structural constraints documented limited training, inequitable certification access, ideological contradictions within schools are not merely implementation gaps. They are systemic failures that position PAI teachers as second-class professionals within the educational system, expected to carry out the state's most sensitive policy goals without the institutional support necessary to do so effectively.

This finding extends ecological models of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) by foregrounding how structural marginalization constrains not only what teachers can do but what they can imagine doing. Teachers in schools with supportive leadership reported confidence in experimenting with dialogical pedagogies; those in environments marked by administrative rigidity or ideological contradiction described their efforts as perpetually precarious. Agency, as lived by these teachers, is not an individual trait but an ecological achievement contingent, distributed, and sustained or undermined by institutional conditions.

The certification bottleneck is particularly consequential. PPG is not merely a credentialing exercise; it is the primary institutional mechanism through which teachers access professional knowledge, peer networks, and the financial resources to continue learning. Excluding PAI teachers from this pathway, or subjecting them to years-long delays, systematically deprives them of the tools they need to stay current with evolving extremist narratives and effective pedagogical responses. As one teacher observed, "We are at the forefront of facing radicalism, but we are at the back in terms of training and certification."

These findings carry several implications for strengthening school-based PVE in Indonesia and similar contexts. First, professional development for IRE teachers must move beyond one-off workshops to sustained, practice-embedded capacity-building. Teachers need opportunities to develop not only theoretical knowledge about radicalization but practical skills in facilitating difficult conversations, recognizing early warning signs, and designing preventive pedagogies.

Second, the certification bottleneck must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The current system, which relegates PAI teachers to a separate, slower pathway, is not merely inefficient; it actively undermines the state's stated policy goals. Teachers cannot implement what they have not been equipped to understand, and they cannot be equipped without access to the professional development that certification enables.

Third, school leaders must recognize that soft prevention cannot succeed if schools themselves are sites of ideological contradiction. This requires intentional efforts to build whole-school coherence around moderation values, including engagement with teachers whose practices may undermine these values. It also requires formal recognition of interreligious work in school strategic plans, timetabled collaborative planning, and dedicated budget lines.

Finally, researchers must move from documenting teachers' practices to developing and testing interventions that can strengthen them. Design-based research, in which researchers and teachers collaboratively develop, implement, and refine preventive pedagogies, offers a promising approach. Such work should also examine student reception how young people interpret, internalize, or resist teachers' preventive messages and track long-term outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Islamic Religious Education teachers in Banyuwangi function as significant soft-prevention actors against youth radicalization through four interconnected pedagogical strategies: contextualizing sacred texts, character-centered pedagogy, role-modeling inclusive behavior, and community engagement. By mobilizing the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* as a theological and ethical resource, teachers translate the abstract ideal of religious moderation into concrete everyday practices that build students' interpretive resilience and empathic dispositions. These strategies directly address the psychological and social mechanisms that radicalizing narratives exploit, including identity simplification, dehumanization of outgroups, and the quest for significance.

However, the effectiveness of teacher-led prevention remains fragile and conditional due to persistent structural constraints: inadequate professional development on preventing extremism, inequitable access to the PPG certification program, and ideological contradictions within schools that undermine the coherence of moderation messages. The metaphor of being treated as "stepchildren" (*anak tiri*) encapsulates the systemic marginalization of PAI teachers within the educational system, positioned at the forefront of counter-radicalization efforts yet denied the institutional support necessary to sustain their work. These findings extend ecological models of teacher agency by revealing how structural marginalization constrains not only teachers' capacity to act but their ability to imagine alternative pedagogical possibilities.

For policymakers, the central implication is that teachers cannot implement what they have not been equipped to understand; sustained, practice-embedded professional development and the integration of PAI teachers into mainstream certification pathways are urgent priorities. For school leaders, whole-school coherence around moderation values and formal recognition of preventive work in school strategic plans are essential to transform fragile individual efforts into sustainable institutional practices. The teachers in this study have shown that within the constraints of limited training, inequitable access to certification, and ideological contradictions, they continue to build students' resilience against extremism through their daily pedagogical practices. Their work demonstrates that Islamic education can be a powerful resource for peace and coexistence. The question that remains is whether the educational system will rise to meet their commitment, providing the institutional support necessary to transform their fragile, individual efforts into sustainable, system-wide practice.

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