

Building Tolerance Through Lived Experiences: Exploring Students' Understanding and Promotion of Tolerance in Three High Schools in West Jakarta

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Abstract

Tolerance plays an important role in reducing cases of discrimination and potential radicalism that originate from social prejudice in a pluralistic society such as Indonesia. However, studies exploring how students' concrete experiences shape their understanding and agency in applying tolerance are still limited. This study aims to describe the process of shaping students' understanding and actions towards tolerance based on their life experiences. A qualitative approach was used through in-depth interviews with ten students selected purposively from three secondary schools in West Jakarta. The three schools have different educational contexts: a religiously homogeneous school, an inclusive private school, and a heterogeneous public school. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The results show that the family is the main source of internalisation of tolerance values; schools function as arenas for social practice that reinforce acceptance of differences; and experiences of intolerance actually encourage critical reflection that fosters students' ability to reject discrimination. These findings emphasise the importance of open family communication, experience-based learning, and spaces for dialogue in schools as the foundation for the formation of young agents of tolerance.

Keywords: character education, family communication, multicultural schools, student experiences, tolerance agency

Abstrak

Toleransi memainkan peran penting dalam mengurangi kasus diskriminasi dan potensi radikalisme yang berasal dari prasangka sosial dalam masyarakat pluralistik seperti Indonesia. Namun, studi yang mengeksplorasi bagaimana pengalaman konkret siswa membentuk pemahaman dan tindakan mereka dalam menerapkan toleransi masih terbatas. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan proses pembentukan pemahaman dan tindakan siswa terhadap toleransi berdasarkan pengalaman hidup mereka. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan sepuluh siswa yang dipilih secara purposif dari tiga sekolah menengah di Jakarta Barat. Ketiga sekolah tersebut memiliki konteks pendidikan yang berbeda: sekolah yang homogen secara agama, sekolah swasta inklusif, dan sekolah negeri heterogen. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke. Hasil analisis data menunjukkan bahwa keluarga adalah sumber utama internalisasi nilai-nilai toleransi, sekolah berfungsi sebagai arena praktik sosial yang memperkuat penerimaan perbedaan, dan

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pengalaman intoleransi sebenarnya mendorong refleksi kritis yang menumbuhkan kemampuan siswa untuk menolak diskriminasi. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya komunikasi keluarga yang terbuka, pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman, dan ruang dialog di sekolah sebagai dasar pembentukan agen toleransi muda.

Kata kunci: agen toleransi, komunikasi keluarga, pendidikan karakter, pengalaman siswa, sekolah multikultural

Introduction

Indonesia is known as a democratic country that upholds diversity as one of the pillars of national identity, as embodied in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. However, current social dynamics show that the application of diversity values has not been fully implemented as it should be. This is evident from the increasing symptoms of identity polarisation, social prejudice, and various forms of intolerance that have seeped into the educational environment (Sirry et al., 2024).

The following research uses Social Learning Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and family communication theory to understand how students develop their views on tolerance through everyday experiences. Social Learning Theory used to explain how adolescents learn attitudes and behaviors by observing those around them, particularly within their family, school, and peer environments. Through these interactions, students encounter tolerant and intolerant behaviors, which then influence how they respond to social differences in their own lives. On the other hand, Symbolic Interactionism, helps explain that students are not passive recipients of social influence. Students actively interpret their experiences and give meaning to the interactions they encounter in their daily lives. Furthermore, Family Communication Theory used to complement the research perspective by showing how the family is the primary social environment where values about respect, diversity, and social boundaries are introduced and reinforced through everyday communication and interaction patterns.

This perspective is useful for viewing tolerance not as a static moral value, but rather as a learning practice that develops gradually through social interaction. In Indonesia's multicultural society, adolescents are directly confronted with religious, ethnic, and cultural differences in their daily lives. Through their relationships within their families, schools, and peer groups, students observe how others respond to diversity. They then interpret these experiences, thus shaping their attitudes and behaviors. Communication within the family plays a crucial role as the initial relational space where understanding of differences begins to develop. Meanwhile, school and interactions with peers serve as social arenas where students understand, practice, negotiate, and even reconstruct the value of tolerance. Thus, tolerance can be understood as a social competence that develops through experience, reflection, and interpersonal interaction, not simply a value instilled through formal education.

In a broader social context, the formation of tolerant attitudes among adolescents is influenced not only by formal education but also by a range of external environments, including family socialisation, peer communities, media exposure, and online interactions. In contemporary societies, young people encounter diverse perspectives

on identity, religion, and cultural difference through digital media and community networks, which can both reinforce and challenge values of tolerance. Media representations, social narratives circulating within communities, and everyday encounters in neighbourhood environments often shape adolescents' early interpretations of diversity before these issues are formally addressed in educational settings (Beyer & Brese, 2024; Nada & Legutko, 2022).

Within this broader ecosystem of social influence, schools occupy a strategic position as structured environments where diversity can be encountered, discussed, and reflected upon through guided interaction. Educational institutions provide opportunities for sustained dialogue, cooperative learning, and shared activities among students from different backgrounds. For this reason, tolerance education has increasingly been positioned as an important preventive strategy to reduce discrimination, identity-based conflict, and potential radicalisation (Lee, 2024; Sakallı et al., 2021).

Although education policies and curricula in many countries including Indonesia have incorporated tolerance as a normative value, empirical studies indicate that its implementation often faces significant challenges. Many educational programmes continue to emphasise declarative instruction and normative messaging rather than experiential learning processes that enable students to internalise tolerance through meaningful social interaction (Jayadi et al., 2022; Mariyono, 2024).

Recent literature reviews indicate that the formation of tolerant attitudes will be more effective if the learning process emphasises not only cognitive aspects but also involves the affective domain and practical application. Ideally, this process should be realised through a participatory approach and direct experiences that enable students to personally experience and reflect on differences (Sumadi et al., 2021; Zakiah et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence in Indonesia shows that there is an imbalance. A number of studies focus more on teacher's perception or evaluations of education policy (Sirry et al., 2024), while others emphasise learning strategies at the primary school level (Zakiah et al., 2023). Such studies provide an important overview of the direction of values education, but few have explored students' subjective experiences in depth. There is still a lack of research exploring how real experiences both when encountering and practising tolerance and intolerance shape their understanding of differences, and how these experiences encourage them to take concrete action as agents of tolerance in the school environment.

Various large-scale national surveys show that the level of tolerance among students is relatively high. However, these findings do not explain how such tolerant attitudes can be transformed into concrete prosocial actions (Laelah et al., 2023). Therefore, research is needed that can capture the process of meaning formation in greater depth particularly how life experiences in the family, school, and community interact to shape students' agency in the context of a diverse society.

Previous literature reveals several important gaps that form the basis of this research. Most research on tolerance in the Indonesian context still focuses on quantitative measurements, policy discussions, or teacher perspectives. As a result, students' everyday experiences as active participants in social life remain relatively

underexplored (Zakiah et al., 2023). This tendency creates a gap in understanding how tolerance is experienced, interpreted, and practiced by students in their daily interactions. From the perspective of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), learning and behavioral development are closely linked to personal experience, reflection, and social interaction. By including student voices, the current research provides a partial view that fully captures how the values of tolerance are internalized and translated into action.

Another gap is the limited number of studies comparing different types of educational institutions, such as religiously homogeneous schools, inclusive schools, and public schools. This limits a deeper understanding of how institutional contexts shape students' perspectives and behaviors. According to ecological systems theory, the educational environment represents an important microsystem that interacts with broader social and cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Differences in school composition, norms, and exposure to diversity are likely to influence students' perceptions of differences, meaning construction, and responses to social situations. These comparative insights broaden the explanation of the relationship between experience, meaning formation, and student actions.

Finally, qualitative exploratory research on how experiences of intolerance can lead to constructive forms of agency is relatively limited. Much of the existing literature tends to position intolerance as a source of negative outcomes. The idea that intolerance is linked to conflict or prejudice is more prevalent in society than examining intolerance's potential to foster positive reflection and action. From a transformative learning perspective, challenging experiences can encourage individuals to critically reassess their assumptions and develop new ways of understanding social reality. In this regard, experiences of intolerance can also open up opportunities for students to take on more active roles, such as mediators, advocates, or change agents, in promoting tolerant behavior (Kishani, 2024).

International scholarship on tolerance education has largely focused on policy implementation, curriculum effectiveness, or large-scale attitudinal measurement. While these studies provide important insights into structural and cognitive dimensions of tolerance, they offer limited explanations of how tolerance is formed through students' lived experiences and everyday social interactions. In particular, global literature remains dominated by outcome-oriented approaches that measure tolerance as a static attitude, rather than as a dynamic social process shaped by family communication, school practices, and peer relationships.

Moreover, comparative qualitative research that examines how different institutional contexts shape students' interpretation and enactment of tolerance remain scarce. Few studies have explored how experiences of intolerance, such as discrimination, exclusion, or identity-based conflict, are interpreted by students and potentially transformed into prosocial agency. This gap limits current understanding of tolerance education as a developmental and interactional process, especially within culturally diverse societies.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to fill empirical and conceptual gaps by exploring in depth how students' life experiences in three different school contexts shape their understanding of tolerance and encourage agency in promoting tolerance.

Specifically, this study examines the process of constructing the meaning of tolerance from students' concrete experiences, the role of family, school practices, and peer dynamics in shaping or inhibiting student agency, and the conditions under which experiences of intolerance transform into pro-social actions.

This study makes two main contributions. Empirically, this research enriches the study of tolerance education in Indonesia through narrative data sourced directly from students' experiences. This approach opens up space to understand the dynamics of forming tolerant attitudes not only from the perspective of policy or teachers, but from the voices and experiences of individuals directly involved in the social learning process in the school environment.

Theoretically, this research expands the application of social learning theory and symbolic interactionism in understanding how adolescents build self-agency in a multicultural context. Through symbolic interaction, students learn to interpret the meaning of tolerance from concrete experiences, whether through relationships with peers, teachers, or their family environment.

The findings of this study are expected to provide practical benefits in the development of a more contextual character education model—namely, education that emphasises experience-based learning, reflective dialogue, and partnerships between schools and families in nurturing a young generation capable of becoming active agents of tolerance in society.

While existing studies predominantly conceptualize intolerance as an indicator of educational failure, this study offers a different perspective by positioning experiences of intolerance as potential catalysts for reflective agency when mediated by family communication and school context. By foregrounding students' narratives across three contrasting school environments, this research moves beyond outcome-based measurements of tolerance and contributes a process-oriented understanding of how tolerance is socially constructed, negotiated, and enacted through lived experience. This approach extends global discussions on tolerance education by highlighting student agency as an emergent outcome of everyday social interaction rather than a predetermined curricular goal.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how secondary school students construct and practice tolerance through their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). This approach was chosen to capture students' subjective meanings, interpretations, and social interactions related to tolerance and intolerance within their everyday contexts. The study focused on understanding tolerance as a socially constructed process shaped by family communication, school environments, and peer interactions.

Participants

This study was conducted in three senior high schools in West Jakarta, as the selected research setting due to its distinct socio-cultural characteristics, particularly its high level of pluralism compared to many other regions in Indonesia. As part of a metropolitan area, West Jakarta is characterized by a dense and heterogeneous population, encompassing diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds that interact within relatively close social spaces. This diversity is reflected in the composition of its educational institutions, where students are more likely to encounter differences in everyday school life. Such conditions provide a relevant and empirically rich context for examining how tolerance is experienced, negotiated, and enacted among students. By focusing on this region, the study is better positioned to capture complex intergroup dynamics and meaning-making processes that may be less visible in more homogeneous settings, thereby offering deeper insights into the development of tolerance within diverse educational environments.

The high schools consisted of a religiously homogeneous school (School A), an inclusive private school (School B), and a heterogeneous public school (School C). The selection of these institutions aimed to capture variations in student diversity, school culture, and opportunities for intergroup interaction, which are important for understanding how tolerance is experienced and enacted across different educational environments.

Participants consisted of ten students enrolled in Grade XI. The decision to focus on Grade XI students was based on developmental and contextual considerations. At this stage, students are generally more capable of expressing their thoughts and reflecting on their social experiences, while also occupying a relatively stable position within the school environment. Unlike Grade XII students, who are typically preoccupied with final examinations and graduation requirements, Grade XI students tend to have greater cognitive and emotional availability to engage in reflective and participatory activities. All participants were approximately 17 years old at the time of the study. Individual ages were not reported separately, as age variation was not a primary analytical focus; instead, the study emphasizes differences in lived experiences of tolerance shaped by diverse institutional and social backgrounds. To protect confidentiality, all participants were identified using pseudonyms: School A consisting of three students: AL, FZ, and AF. School B consists of three students: VN, WL, and RH. School C consists of four students: AU, CL, ZR, and RF.

The composition of participants included six females and four males aged between 16 and 18 years old. All of them were Year 11 students, a stage of development that is psychologically characterised by increased self-reflection and social empathy. The socio-economic background of the participants' families was classified as middle class; most of the parents worked in the education, service, and trade sectors.

The religious and ethnic diversity of the participants reflects the social dynamics in West Jakarta. At School A, all students are Muslim. Private Inclusive School B has students who are Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist, while School C has a mix of students from various religions (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism) and ethnicities (Javanese, Betawi, Chinese, and Manado). This variety provides a rich contextual basis

for examining how social environments and family experiences shape students' understanding of diversity and tolerance.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants and school contexts

School	Participants (n)	Participant Codes	Gender (F/M)	Age (years)	Grade	Participants' Religious Backgrounds	School Diversity Context
School A	3	AL, FZ, AF	1 / 2	16-18	Year 11	Muslim	Religiously homogeneous
School B	3	VN, WL, RH	2 / 1	16-18	Year 11	Muslim, Catholic, Buddhist	Inclusive private school
School C	4	AU, CL, ZR, RF	3 / 1	16-18	Year 11	Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism	Religiously and ethnically diverse public school
Total	10	-	6 / 4	16-18	Year 11	Multiple religious backgrounds	Three contrasting educational settings

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of participants and the diversity contexts of the three schools. The study involved ten Grade XI students who were between 16 and 18 years old, consisting of six females and four males. All participants came from middle-income families, whose parents primarily worked in the education, service, and trade sectors. The three schools represented different diversity contexts, ranging from a religiously homogeneous school to inclusive and highly diverse educational settings. These contrasting contexts provided an appropriate basis for examining how family, school and peer environments shaped students' understanding of tolerance.

Measurements

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2024. The interview guide was designed to elicit students' narratives regarding their experiences of tolerance and intolerance within family, school, and peer–community contexts. Key topics included family communication about differences, classroom and school practices related to diversity, peer interactions, and students' responses to experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

The interview guide was developed based on principles derived from Social Learning Theory and family communication theory, and subsequently adapted to the context of multicultural education in Indonesia. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Indonesian and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, allowing participants to share detailed reflections on their lived experiences related to diversity and social interaction. Given that the participants were under 18 years of age, ethical clearance for data collection was obtained through formal approval from the school, which acted as an institutional gatekeeper. Furthermore, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time before the interview. Verbal and written consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

This study intentionally focused on students' narratives as primary sources for understanding how tolerance is interpreted and practiced in everyday interactions. Participants were encouraged to share concrete experiences and reflections rather than general opinions, enabling the study to capture how tolerance is constructed through daily social encounters. Although family communication constitutes a central context in the formation of tolerance values, the perspectives of parents were not directly collected as empirical data. Instead, parental influence was explored through students' accounts of family communication and experiences at home. The absence of direct parental perspectives is therefore acknowledged as a methodological limitation, which is discussed further in the limitation section of this study.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, following the phases of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke and further elaborated by Byrne (2022). This approach was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings within students' narrative accounts of tolerance and intolerance experiences. The analysis began with data familiarisation, in which interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' language, expressions, and social contexts. Initial notes were made to capture early impressions and potential analytic insights.

During the initial coding phase, meaningful segments of data were identified and labelled inductively based on participants' narratives. Coding focused on experiences related to family communication, school practices, peer interactions, and responses to diversity. In the theme development stage, related codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected shared patterns across participants' experiences. These themes were refined through iterative comparison to ensure coherence and consistency with the data (Figure 1).

Finally, themes were reviewed and clearly defined to represent central aspects of students' lived experiences of tolerance formation. Throughout the analytic process, attention was given to maintaining a close connection between themes and participants' original accounts.

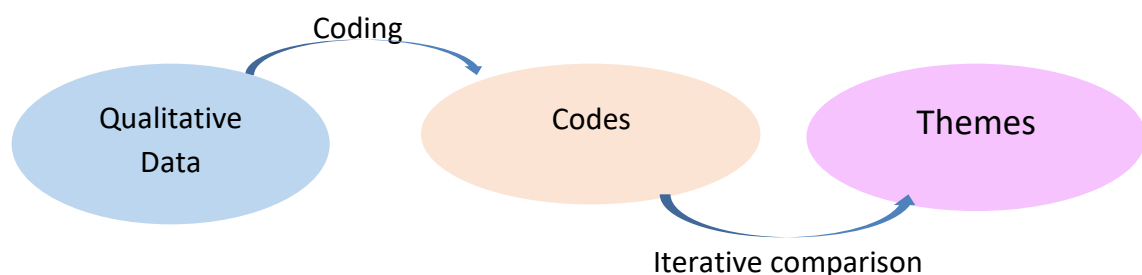


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and careful transcription of interviews, and triangulation of participants' narratives across the three

different school contexts. Comparing students' accounts from the religiously homogeneous school, the inclusive private school, and the heterogeneous public school allowed the researcher to identify converging and contrasting experiences related to tolerance formation.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting analytic decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim accounts and by continuously comparing emerging themes with the original data to minimise researcher bias. Finally, transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and institutional environments, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings. The data analysis process is presented in the following flowchart to provide a clear overview of the analytic stages and procedures applied in this study.

Findings

The findings show that students' understanding of tolerance develops through social experiences within the family, school, and peer environments. Although all students recognized the importance of respecting differences, the meaning and practice of tolerance varied across the three school settings. In School A, tolerance was influenced more strongly by family narratives and religion. In School B, the values introduced at school were generally reinforced through family practices, creating a more consistent understanding of respect for diversity. Meanwhile, students in School C encountered tolerance more directly through everyday interactions in socially diverse environments, including situations where they had to respond to conflict or intolerance among peers.

In these contexts, tolerance did not emerge from a single social institution. Students continuously interpreted and negotiated their experiences through family life, classroom interactions, friendships, and relationships within the wider community. These overlapping experiences influenced students' understanding of differences and their responses to diversity in their daily lives.

The interview findings also showed that the development of tolerance among students was influenced mainly by family, school, and peer relationships. Each of these environments contributed differently to the way students interpreted and practiced tolerance in their daily interactions. At the same time, these social environments are closely connected to each other. Values introduced through family communication often became the initial basis for understanding differences, while schools provided opportunities for those values to be tested and negotiated through interactions with peers. Friendships also became important spaces where tolerance was practiced, questioned, and occasionally reinterpreted. Through these ongoing experiences, students gradually develop their own understanding of how to respond to diversity in social life.

School A: Family as the Primary Foundation of Tolerance

At School A, students learned more about the importance of respecting differences through family communication than through their interactions at school. One student, AL, explained that his parents consistently taught him not to insult others, even when they held different beliefs. He stated,

"Their message to me was not to insult each other, even if they are of different religions." (AL, School A).

This statement indicates that tolerance was understood as a practical moral rule applied in everyday life, particularly to avoid hurting or offending other people. These values emerged from religious teachings transmitted through routine interactions between parents and their children.

In this context, tolerance was not understood as an abstract civic concept but rather as a behavioral guideline within family life, such as being mindful of one's words, refraining from mocking differences, and continuing to respect people of other religions. However, family experiences also revealed certain limitations in the interpretation of tolerance.

Several students shared personal experiences of interfaith marriages within their families. These experiences left strong emotional impressions and influenced their views on interreligious relationships. For example, AL directly associated his parents' divorce with differences in religious beliefs within the family. He explained,

"My mother married someone from a different religion than my father, and now they have separated, and my father has converted to another religion to marry someone else." (AL, School A).

This experience shaped his belief that religious differences should be respected but were not always considered suitable for more intimate relationships, such as marriage.

This view was reinforced when AL stated,

"My parents' experience and my own experience made me choose to marry someone of the same religion. I cannot have a different religion because I will continue to believe in my own religion." (AL, School A).

This statement highlights the dual role of the family in shaping tolerance. On the one hand, families teach the importance of respecting people with different beliefs in everyday social interactions. However, families may also become a source of limitations regarding openness toward interreligious relationships. In other words, tolerance was taught within a fairly strict normative framework: respecting differences while maintaining certain boundaries in closer social relationships.

Meanwhile, the school did not appear to play a significant role in learning tolerance. Several students revealed that discussions about diversity rarely emerged openly in the classroom, and teachers had not played a substantial role in facilitating dialogue across perspectives. FZ described the learning environment as inconsistent because the teachers were frequently absent. He stated,

"The learning is quite good, but the teachers are rarely there, often absent. So the classroom becomes empty and inefficient." (FZ, School A).

He also added that teachers rarely encouraged classroom discussion:

"The problem is that teachers are rarely open to questions and answers." (FZ, School A).

These experiences suggest that the learning environment did not fully provide space for students to discuss differences critically and openly. Tolerance is rarely explicitly addressed or modeled in classroom interactions. This was also reflected in the low level of student participation during lessons. AF explained that his classmates tended to remain passive when the teachers asked questions. He stated,

“Even if a teacher asks a question, my friends rarely want to answer. Maybe because they do not understand the timing.” (FZ, School A).

These statements indicate that interactions between teachers and students remained limited, reducing opportunities to build a more reflective dialogue about diversity. In a relatively homogeneous school setting such as this, the formation of tolerance values ultimately depended more heavily on the narratives and experiences that students brought from their family environments.

School B: Alignment Between School Values and Family Practices

In contrast to the previous context, students at School B demonstrated a more open and explicit understanding of tolerance. For these students, tolerance is not only associated with respecting religious differences but also with accepting diversity in broader social contexts. VN, for example, described tolerance as “accepting all kinds of differences,” including differences in ethnicity, physical appearance, and religion. He stated,

“I think tolerance is accepting all kinds of differences. It could be ethnicity, physical appearance, religion, and so on.” (VN, School B).

A similar view was expressed by RH, who explained that tolerance involves respecting differences related to ethnicity, religion and race. He stated,

“The way we respect the differences around us involves ethnicity, religion, and race.” (RH, School B).

These statements suggest that students’ understanding of tolerance is closely connected to their daily social experiences. Tolerance is not merely understood as a theoretical concept but as an attitude practiced in daily interactions with people from different backgrounds. In this school context, tolerance appears to be learned not only through formal teaching but also through shared experiences in school activities, such as celebrating religious holidays together and cooperating in various social activities. Through these interactions, students become more familiar with diversity as part of their daily lives.

However, despite this relatively inclusive environment, some students admitted that ethnic prejudice still exists, particularly against students of Chinese descent. This finding indicates that even in schools that actively promote inclusivity, internalized social stereotypes and biases may persist among students. In other words, inclusive educational practices do not automatically eliminate the broader social prejudices that students may bring from outside the school environment.

Families also play an important role in strengthening the inclusive values introduced at school. Parents consistently emphasized the importance of respecting others and avoiding behaviors that may offend people from different backgrounds. Consequently, students experience continuity between the values taught at home and those reinforced at school. This continuity can be observed in the way students apply

these teachings in their daily interactions. WL, a Buddhist student, explained how he adjusted his behavior to respect his Muslim friends during the fasting period. He stated, *"I have Muslim friends, and when they are fasting, I respect that as a non-Islamic religion to eat behind them or not eat in front of them."* (WL, School B).

A similar perspective was shared by RH, who recalled his parents' advice about maintaining respect in social relationships: He explained,

"What certainly does not offend others is that we must continue to respect each other, our friends and other strangers." (RH, School B).

These statements show that respect for differences is consistently reinforced both at home and at school.

The alignment between family and school values creates a social environment in which tolerance is continuously modelled and practiced. Even when students encounter intolerant attitudes or experiences, family teachings often encourage them to maintain respectful relationships with peers from different religious or ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, collaboration between the family and school contributes to a more consistent practice of tolerance in students' daily lives.

School C: Tolerance as Active Social Practice and Mediation

School C presented the most complex picture of how tolerance is understood and practiced in everyday life. Students tend to view tolerance as a social necessity in a highly diverse environment. They are accustomed to interacting with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and these interactions are reflected in various forms of mutual support within both school and neighborhood activities. For example, AU described tolerance as essential for maintaining social harmony. He stated, *"I think tolerance is a must. Because if we are not tolerant, it will cause many problems."* (AU, School C).

Similarly, RF defined tolerance as treating others equally, regardless of their identity. He explained,

"Tolerance is like an attitude that does not discriminate. What tribe, ethnicity, religion, etc." (RF, School C).

These statements suggest that students in School C understand tolerance not only as respect for difference but also as an everyday social practice necessary for living within a pluralistic community.

Despite this relatively open environment, experiences of intolerance still persist. Some students mentioned incidents involving racial slurs or negative comments on certain religious practices. However, what is particularly interesting is the way in which several students responded to these situations. Rather than escalating the conflict, some chose to act as mediators or reminded their peers not to repeat such behavior. This indicates that students are not merely passive recipients of tolerance values but are also actively involved in maintaining social harmony within their peer environment.

Students also explained that respect for diversity is reinforced through school activities that normalize religious and cultural differences in everyday life, including daily prayers and various religious celebrations in school. Through these repeated interactions, diversity becomes familiar rather than something perceived as threatening.

While also, family and community environments further strengthen inclusive attitudes. CL described how families and neighbors from different religious backgrounds support one another during religious events. She stated,

“When we pray in the field, my neighbors are usually Christians, so sometimes they help protect the environment. And if it’s Christmas, we really help protect the environment.” (CL, School C).

This experience illustrates how mutual cooperation across religious boundaries becomes part of everyday community life.

A similar experience was shared by ZR, who described living in a socially diverse neighborhood. She explained,

“My neighbourhood is all Chinese, but when I leave the alley there is a boarding school, so it is very tolerant.” (ZR, School C).

This statement reflects how frequent encounters with different social and religious groups contribute to students’ perception that diversity is normal and manageable within daily interactions.

Overall, the experiences of students in School C show that tolerance develops through continuous interaction within the school, family, and community environments. In this context, tolerance is not only taught as a moral value but also practiced as part of everyday social relationships in a diverse society.

Comparative Overview Across School Contexts

Across the three school contexts, several important similarities and differences become more visible when the findings are compared to each other. Although students in all three schools demonstrated an awareness of the importance of tolerance, their understanding, experience, and practice of tolerance differed depending on their social and institutional environments. In School A, tolerance is shaped mainly through family narratives and tends to be understood within relatively clear, normative boundaries. Students are taught to respect differences, particularly in religious matters, but this respect does not always extend to deeper forms of acceptance, especially in personal or intimate relationships. As a result, tolerance is often practiced as maintaining a respectful distance rather than building closer forms of engagement across differences. In contrast, students in School B demonstrated a more integrated understanding of tolerance. The inclusive values promoted within the school environment are reinforced by similar messages from families, creating continuity between home and school. This alignment allows students to internalize tolerance more consistently in their daily interactions, where respect for differences is not only discussed conceptually but also practised through everyday activities and peer relationships.

School C reflects a more dynamic and situational form of tolerance than School B. Students are accustomed to living and interacting within highly diverse social environments, both inside and outside school; therefore, tolerance is continuously negotiated through everyday encounters. Students are not only exposed to differences but also actively respond to them, including when facing intolerant attitudes among peers. In several cases, they positioned themselves as mediators or informal influencers who attempted to reduce conflict and encourage mutual respect within their social circles. Overall, these comparisons indicate that tolerance is not shaped solely by

exposure to diversity but also by the extent to which family, school, and peer environments work together in shaping students' perspectives and social experiences. The stronger the alignment between these social environments, the more consistently tolerance is understood and practiced in students' daily lives.

Discussion

This study shows that tolerance among adolescents develops through everyday social experiences rather than formal instruction alone. Students learn how to respond to differences through repeated interactions within family, school, and peer environments. In this process, tolerance was not simply understood as a moral concept taught by adults but as something interpreted and practiced through daily encounters with people from different backgrounds.

These findings support previous studies showing that direct interaction with diversity plays an important role in developing tolerant attitudes (Beyer & Brese, 2024; Nada & Legutko, 2022). In the Indonesian context, this process is particularly relevant because adolescents encounter religious, ethnic, and cultural differences not only at school but also in family and community life. Consequently, students' understanding of tolerance is continuously shaped through social interactions, reflections, and lived experiences.

Research in the Indonesian context has also shown that tolerance education becomes more meaningful when it involves experiential learning and reflective engagement rather than relying only on normative value transmission (Jayadi et al., 2022; Zakiah et al., 2023). These studies indicate that tolerance is better understood as a social competence that develops gradually through interaction across different social environments.

This research highlights the multi-layered interactions between family communication, school practices, and peer relationships in shaping young people's understanding and application of tolerance in their daily lives. The research findings demonstrate that families play a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of diversity from an early age. Long before students encounter formal discussions about diversity in school, they learn how to respond to people from different backgrounds through everyday interactions at home. Parents are children's first point of reference in understanding what is considered acceptable, respectful, or inappropriate in social relationships. Through everyday communication and behavior, children observe how adults react to differences, whether with openness, caution, or even rejection.

This reflects the perspective of the Social Learning Theory, which explains that children develop attitudes and behavioral orientations through observation and interaction with people around them. In family settings, parental responses to diversity often become examples that adolescents later use to interpret and respond to social differences in their own lives. As a result, family interaction not only introduces moral values but also shapes the way adolescents understand social boundaries and relationships with others who are different from them.

Yet family influence is far from uniformly positive. The data show that not all family communication encourages the kind of expansive, egalitarian tolerance that is often ideally envisioned. Where parental guidance is delivered in a top-down, authoritative manner (with children expected to follow rules rather than reason through moral questions) tolerance tends to be understood as restraint rather than recognition. In practice, this means students learn to avoid obviously hurtful behaviour, but may not develop a genuine openness toward those who are different. Prior research similarly finds that dialogic family environments, where children are invited to ask questions and explore their own thinking, tend to produce more empathic and perspective-taking orientations toward difference, while more hierarchical communication patterns tend to reinforce closed boundaries (Aminah et al., 2023; Ramadhana et al., 2019).

These patterns are well documented in the broader literature on family socialisation. When families discuss differences openly and reflectively, adolescents tend to develop more nuanced and inclusive understandings of social diversity (Sitanggang et al., 2025; Sumadi et al., 2021). By contrast, where family interaction is shaped by authority and obedience rather than genuine dialogue, young people may come to see tolerance primarily as a means of avoiding friction rather than a genuine valuing of others. Taken together, these observations suggest that the texture of family communication plays a decisive role in how adolescents come to interpret and practise tolerance in social settings.

Through Social Learning Theory, parental responses to differences can be understood as behavioral models that gradually shape how children view and evaluate others. When parents demonstrate an open attitude and engage children in reflective dialogue about social experiences, tolerance develops not simply as a moral code, but as an ethical attitude lived out in everyday life. Conversely, without such a space for reflection, children tend to understand tolerance limitedly as a prohibition against offending or provoking conflict. Research on family communication also shows that open dialogue plays a crucial role in building deeper social empathy. On the other hand, unresolved family tensions, including those related to religious or cultural differences, can indirectly perpetuate exclusionary attitudes even if the family appears to uphold values of openness. In such situations, tolerance often stops at the moral recognition of differences, without evolving into broader social acceptance (Fristyarini & Raihana, 2025; Pramono & Lubis, 2023).

Schools enter this picture as sites where family-formed orientations are either affirmed or unsettled. Where student populations are homogeneous and teaching is predominantly one-directional, the school adds relatively little to students' understanding of diversity: children continue to rely on family frameworks because there are few alternative encounters to prompt reflection. This pattern supports existing work in the *Journal of Family Sciences*, which has argued that character education cannot rely on curriculum alone but must be embedded in the relational fabric of school life and supported by pedagogical approaches that invite genuine dialogue (Ngulandari et al., 2024).

School B offers a different picture. Here, the institutional culture actively creates space for cross-identity interaction: students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds work alongside one another, attend shared celebrations, and navigate

everyday social life in ways that make diversity a practical reality rather than an abstract concept. Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism, this matters because meaning, including the meaning of tolerance, is constructed in interaction rather than acquired through instruction (Scott & Duncan, 2016). Inclusive schools create spaces for social dialogue in which tolerance is not merely discussed as a normative value, but lived through concrete actions. The coherence between values promoted at school and those reinforced within the family further strengthens the internalization of tolerance as a stable social orientation.

Inclusive schools that offer real opportunities for intergroup contact thus provide conditions that are particularly conducive to experiential learning about difference. Through joint activities, shared rituals, and daily encounters across social boundaries, students have the chance to watch how inclusion works in practice, to work through moments of friction, and to develop norms of respect that feel genuinely owned rather than externally imposed. This aligns with international evidence suggesting that diverse school environments reduce prejudice most effectively when meaningful interaction is accompanied by structured reflection (Beyer & Brese, 2024; Zakiah et al., 2023). Thus, effective tolerance education extends beyond cognitive instruction to include reflective and dialogical experiences that engage students emotionally and socially (Sitanggang et al., 2025).

Peer interaction became one of the most important spaces where students practiced and negotiated tolerance. Experiences involving stereotypes, exclusion, or discriminatory remarks often required students to respond immediately to social tensions within their friendship circles. Interestingly, several students did not remain passive when they encountered intolerant behavior. Some attempted to mediate conflicts, remind their peers not to repeat offensive comments, or maintain respectful interactions within their social groups. These experiences suggest that intolerance does not always lead to negative outcomes. In some situations, conflict experiences encouraged students to reflect more critically on diversity and social relationships. Students who experienced more open communication within the family or inclusive interactions at school appeared more capable of responding constructively when facing social tension among peers (Laelah et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2022).

Symbolic Interactionism helps clarify what is happening in these peer encounters. Symbolic Interactionism helps explain how young people make sense of their social experiences, especially in moments shaped by difference and tension. Discriminatory situations that are joked about, veiled exclusion, or conflicts related to identity are not simply met with automatic reactions. Students interpret what happens around them by reading social cues, recalling past experiences, and considering how others might feel or respond. Through this process, they gradually construct meanings that shape their attitudes and actions. Studies of cross-cultural interactions and experiential learning further demonstrate that such encounters can deepen perspective-taking and strengthen moral awareness, especially when students are encouraged to reflect on what they experience in everyday social life (Nada & Legutko, 2022). Within the Indonesian socio-cultural context characterised by high levels of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity such processes of meaning-making become particularly significant. Indonesian society is shaped by everyday encounters across differences in religion,

ethnicity, and cultural traditions, which provide adolescents with frequent opportunities to interpret diversity through social interaction. In this setting, experiences of disagreement, misunderstanding, or identity-based tension may become important moments of reflection through which young people negotiate the meaning of tolerance in practice.

What the data suggest, then, is that students who enter peer interactions with a reflective capacity, developed through open family communication and reinforced in inclusive school settings, are better placed to respond to intolerance constructively rather than passively absorbing or reproducing it. This resonates with international findings on youth agency, which indicate that young people are most likely to take active moral stances when they have experienced social encounters that invite genuine reflection and positioning (Kishani, 2024). At the same time, studies on multicultural education in Indonesia indicate that tolerance is often shaped through everyday intergroup interaction within schools and communities rather than solely through formal moral instruction (Jayadi et al., 2022; Zakiah et al., 2023). In this regard, peer interaction becomes an important arena in which adolescents interpret the meaning of diversity and develop the social competencies necessary for living in a pluralistic society.

Consequently, tolerance education needs to prioritize learning through experience rather than moral instruction alone. Teachers and parents play a crucial role in creating reflective dialogue spaces, facilitating cross-cultural activities, and helping students reinterpret their social experiences constructively. This approach is particularly relevant in the Indonesian socio-cultural context, where students grow up in a society characterised by significant religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Everyday interactions across these differences provide important opportunities for adolescents to encounter, interpret, and negotiate the meaning of tolerance in practice. In such settings, effective moral education depends on the school's capacity to create real-life situations in which students can test, negotiate, and reflect upon social values in everyday contexts (Rehren & Sauer, 2024). Research on multicultural education in Indonesia similarly indicates that tolerance is more effectively cultivated through experiential interaction and reflective dialogue rather than through normative instruction alone.

This study also highlights the importance of combining Social Learning Theory and Symbolic Interactionism to better understand how adolescents develop tolerance in everyday life. Social Learning Theory helps explain how students learn attitudes and behaviours from people around them, especially through interactions within family and school environments. At the same time, Symbolic Interactionism helps explain how adolescents interpret those experiences, give meaning to them, and negotiate their understanding of differences through daily social interaction. In the Indonesian context, where religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity is part of everyday social life, these processes occur continuously through ordinary encounters at home, school, and within peer relationships. Therefore, tolerance is not simply formed as a fixed moral value, but develops gradually through interaction, experience, and reflection within diverse social environments.

In practical terms, the findings support policy recommendations to strengthen synergy between families and schools in character education. Values instilled at school are more likely to be internalized when reinforced through open family communication and lived examples at home. This is consistent with research demonstrating that family communication grounded in cultural symbols and empathetic dialogue strengthens children's social resilience in navigating diversity (Wijayanti et al., 2024).

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The relatively small number of participants and the focus on a single urban context limit generalizability. Reliance on retrospective self-reports may introduce recall bias, and the absence of parental and teacher perspectives constrains a holistic understanding of the tolerance education ecosystem. Future research should involve multiple stakeholders, expand geographical scope, and employ participatory approaches such as photovoice or narrative inquiry to further explore how adolescents construct and negotiate tolerance in diverse social environments.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This study shows that students' understanding of tolerance develops through continuous interaction within the family, school, and peer environments. Family communication is the earliest foundation through which students learn respect, social boundaries, and attitudes toward differences. Schools and peer relationships provide spaces where these values are practiced, challenged, and sometimes reinterpreted through everyday interactions. The findings also indicate that tolerance is not formed only through formal teaching but also through repeated social experiences that allow students to encounter and reflect on diversity in their daily lives.

The study further demonstrates that experiences of intolerance do not always lead to stronger prejudices or social distance. In some cases, these experiences encouraged students to reflect more critically on diversity and develop more active responses to maintaining respectful relationships with others. Therefore, tolerance should not be understood as a fixed moral value transmitted through instruction alone, but as a social process shaped through interaction, experience, and reflection. Effective tolerance education requires collaboration between families, schools, and peer environments so that students can develop consistent and meaningful experiences of living with diversity.

Recommendation

The findings suggest that tolerance education should provide students with more opportunities to directly experience diversity through interaction, dialogue, and collaborative activities. Schools can strengthen tolerance by creating learning environments that encourage open discussion, peer engagement, and interaction across religious, ethnic and cultural differences. Activities such as group projects, shared celebrations, and classroom dialogues may help students become more familiar with diversity in their everyday social lives. Schools also need to respond more openly when experiences of exclusion or discriminatory behavior occur among the students. With appropriate support from teachers, peer mediation, and counselling,

these situations can become opportunities for reflection and learning about respect and social relationships.

Concurrently, family involvement remains important because values introduced at school are more likely to be internalized when reinforced through communication at home. Strengthening collaboration between schools, families, and communities may help students develop a more consistent understanding of tolerance in their daily lives. In the Indonesian context, where adolescents interact across family, school, community, and digital environments, tolerance education should involve broader social participation. Community organizations, youth groups, and religious leaders may contribute by supporting dialogue and activities that encourage positive interactions across differences. Future research could involve parents, teachers, and community members more directly to explore how tolerance is negotiated across wider social environments.

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