

THE PERSPECTIVE OF MUSLIM MINORITY TENTH-GRADE STUDENTS AT SMANSA ON RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: This research aims to explore the Muslim minority's perspective on religious differences in the SMAN 1 environment. The research method used is a phenomenological qualitative research method with semi-structured interview techniques and participant observation, the number of informants is two people, one man and one woman who were chosen purposively. Data analysis using the Miles & Huberman interactive model. The research results show five main themes: (1) ambivalent perceptions of diversity, (2) dynamics of interfaith interactions, (3) school support for religious activities, (4) variations in the role of teachers in building tolerance, and (5) expressions of religious identity that are not always accepted equally. These findings confirm that tolerance in schools is formed through social interaction, the role of teachers, and institutional culture. This research shows that students' experiences in interacting with religious diversity in schools are complex and influenced by social dynamics that occur in daily activities. Students generally understand that diversity is part of school life, but their perceptions and experiences vary, ranging from a sense of comfort and mutual respect to tension during discussions related to religion. These findings emphasize that tolerance is not formed automatically in a diverse environment, but is a process that requires institutional support, healthy social relations, and the role of teachers in socializing diversity.

Keywords: student perspective; multicultural education; religious tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of religious diversity within the educational context have become a significant concern in multicultural societies such as Indonesia. In recent years, the increasing number of intolerance cases in social and educational environments indicates that the internalization of tolerance values has not yet been optimal. At the global level, interfaith education has become a key agenda promoted by UNESCO and international educational institutions to foster mutual respect and appreciation of religious differences. In Indonesia, as a country with a Muslim majority and diverse religious minorities, the challenge of nurturing social harmony in schools has become increasingly complex (Albana, 2023).

Religious diversity in senior high schools functions not only as a space for academic learning but also as a social arena where interreligious interactions occur intensively. Students from different religious backgrounds may experience psychological and social dynamics in understanding their identities and positions within majority-minority relations. Research by Rahmelia (2020) indicates that a sense of life meaningfulness is closely related to students' religious tolerance attitudes in faith-based schools, where students with higher levels of spiritual understanding tend to be more open to differences.

At the national level, the Indonesian government has made efforts to strengthen religious moderation education through various programs initiated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The implementation of religious moderation education in senior high schools plays a crucial role in preventing the emergence of exclusive attitudes among students (Albana, 2023). However, field realities show that minority students—

particularly Muslims in schools dominated by non-Muslim populations—still face challenges in openly expressing their religious identities without experiencing social exclusion (Syafrudin et al., 2025).

A study by Hamdan et al. (2025) emphasizes that schools serve as strategic spaces for instilling multicultural values. In this context, Islamic religious education is expected not merely to focus on doctrinal instruction but also to cultivate moderate, open, and inclusive attitudes. Nevertheless, the implementation of these values varies across schools, depending largely on the role of teachers and the school climate that is fostered.

The issue of Muslim students' minority status becomes increasingly relevant when linked to their social experiences at school. Jannah and Ni'mah (2022) reveal that Muslim students in schools with non-Muslim majorities often negotiate their religious identities through participation in interfaith activities while maintaining their Islamic values. This dynamic demonstrates that tolerance does not necessarily imply assimilation, but rather adaptation and dialogue among different belief systems.

Furthermore, disparities in access to religious facilities within schools also influence Muslim students' perceptions of a plural educational environment. Research by Afrijal et al. (2025) finds that religious education teachers play a strategic role in fostering religious tolerance, particularly through approaches that respect the spiritual experiences of minority students.

Although numerous studies have addressed tolerance education and religious moderation in Indonesia, most focus on contexts where Muslims constitute the majority. A research gap emerges due to the limited number of studies that specifically highlight the experiences of Muslim students as minorities in heterogeneous public schools. For instance, Khoirunnisa et al. (2022) primarily emphasize the measurement of tolerance levels rather than exploring the meanings and personal experiences of students within their social contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the perspectives of Muslim tenth-grade students at SMANSA as a minority group regarding religious differences within the school environment. The research focuses on their social experiences, the meanings they construct, and the adaptation strategies they employ in multicultural interactions. A qualitative approach is employed to capture the depth of experiences and personal narratives that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to enriching the literature on multicultural education and religious moderation, particularly within the context of Muslim minorities. Practically, the results may serve as a foundation for schools and policymakers in designing more inclusive and socially equitable educational strategies.

RESEARCHMETHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, as it aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of Muslim students as a minority group interacting with peers from different religious backgrounds within the school environment. The phenomenological approach was selected to enable the researcher to explore the meanings of participants' lived experiences through rich and reflective narrative descriptions, as recommended by Suhartini (2021) within the framework of transcendental phenomenology. This approach aligns with Rahmelia (2020), who emphasizes the importance of deeply understanding students' attitudes and experiences within socio-religious contexts, rather than merely measuring religious tolerance through quantitative indicators.

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 (SMANSA). The research participants consisted of two Muslim tenth-grade students—a male and a female—who were positioned as a minority group within the school. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) Muslim students who actively participate in school activities, (2) students who have experience interacting with non-Muslim peers, and (3) students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. This sampling strategy is commonly applied in social and educational research focusing on minority groups (Latifah et al., 2021).

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and personal reflections regarding religious life within the school. Participant observation was carried out during classroom activities, school ceremonies, and extracurricular programs to directly examine interreligious social interactions. To ensure data trustworthiness, the researcher applied source and method triangulation and conducted member checking by asking participants to review interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations to confirm the accuracy of meanings. These validation techniques are widely recommended in multicultural education research in Indonesia (Celina et al., 2025).

Data analysis was performed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This process was conducted cyclically and reflectively to identify key themes representing the experiences of Muslim minority students. This analytical model is considered particularly relevant in multicultural education research because it offers flexibility in uncovering contextual meanings derived from participants' lived experiences (Zamroni et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings were obtained through an analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The analytical process identified five main themes that illustrate students' experiences in understanding religious diversity and practicing tolerance within the school environment.

Students' Perceptions of Religious Diversity in the School Environment

Interview data indicate that students hold varied perceptions of religious diversity within the school environment. The first informant described religious diversity in a positive manner, particularly in terms of mutual respect among students of different religious backgrounds. The informant stated, "We respect each other and do not mock differences in religion." The student also expressed a sense of comfort when learning alongside non-Muslim peers, noting, "It feels enjoyable and makes me happy even though we have different religions."

Furthermore, the first informant acknowledged that learning activities at the school are implemented in an inclusive manner without distinguishing students based on religious affiliation. The informant shared an experience of being treated equally regardless of religious background, stating, "When we pray, they still accept it and do not mock me when I lead the prayer."

In contrast, the second informant recognized the presence of religious diversity but demonstrated ambivalence in experiencing it. The informant stated, "Some people are respectful, while others are not," and admitted feeling uncomfortable when participating in learning activities alongside students from different religious backgrounds.

Observational data supported these findings, showing that while some groups of students were able to interact harmoniously across religious lines, certain groups tended to engage primarily within homogeneous friendship circles.

Patterns of Interreligious Social Interaction

Social interactions observed in classrooms and across the school environment revealed varied patterns of relationships. The first informant reported close and respectful interactions, stating, "We are close, we respect each other, and we do not undermine each other's opinions even though we have different religions." The informant also noted that discussions related to religion generally proceeded "normally," without tension.

However, the second informant described a more dynamic experience. The informant recalled having experienced a minor conflict during an interreligious discussion, stating, "We discussed Adam... different historical perspectives... it turned into a debate, became heated, and eventually led to an argument."

Observations conducted during break times and classroom activities indicated that students generally interacted in a fluid and relaxed manner. Nevertheless, sensitive topics such as religion were found to have the potential to trigger minor tensions when discussions were not adequately facilitated by teachers.

Implementation of Religious Activities and School Facilities

Through interviews and observations, it was found that the school provides adequate facilities and support for Muslim students to perform religious practices. The first informant stated that religious activities were conducted "well" and "smoothly," and that the school offered strong institutional support, including religious facilities. For Muslim students, a musholla is provided for congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, religious study sessions, and informal gatherings among Muslim peers. The informant emphasized that these activities were "strongly supported." Attitudes of non-Muslim peers were also perceived as positive, described as "good," and religious practices at school were reported to proceed "smoothly" without obstacles.

The second informant reported similar experiences but provided more detailed descriptions, stating, "There is a religious study session every Friday, and we are allowed to perform the Zuhr prayer every day... it is very well supported." The informant also shared an interesting observation that some non-Muslim students expressed interest in participating in Muslim religious activities, such as Friday religious study sessions, noting, "They want to join the religious study or participate in worship activities."

Observations conducted during Friday activities indicated instances of cross-group participation that reflected an inclusive atmosphere, although not all students were actively involved.

The Role of Teachers and School Policies in Promoting Tolerance

Interview data revealed differing perceptions among informants regarding the role of teachers. The first informant stated that teachers never mocked or spoke negatively about other religions, noting, "They do not discuss or mock other religions." The informant also mentioned that school activities such as sports and arts events (porseni) provided opportunities for interreligious interaction.

In contrast, the second informant expressed a more critical perspective, stating, "There are many teachers who are not tolerant, and there are teachers who lack tolerance," although the informant still acknowledged that teachers generally treated students "fairly."

Observations during flag ceremonies and classroom instruction showed that most teachers maintained professional conduct and did not display overtly discriminatory behavior. However, sensitivity toward religious diversity appeared to vary among individual teachers.

Expression of Religious Identity and the Meaning of Tolerance

The first informant reported feeling free to express religious identity, for example, through praying and reciting the Qur'an in the classroom. The second informant expressed religious identity through symbols and ritual practices, stating, "Wearing a hijab... saying assalamualaikum... praying in Arabic... wiping the face after prayer."

Both informants shared similar interpretations of tolerance, defining it as respecting others' opinions, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. The second informant further suggested that the school should "increase tolerance and awareness," including improving facilities such as prayer rooms and expanding inclusive religious activities.

Observations of extracurricular activities indicated that expressions of religious identity were generally accepted. However, opportunities for full self-expression among some students were still influenced by social sensitivity within peer groups.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students' perceptions of religious diversity in schools are not monolithic but are shaped through everyday experiences of interreligious interaction. Some students, such as the first informant, perceived diversity positively and described school life as a space characterized by respect and comfort. However, other students expressed ambivalence and even discomfort when interacting with peers from different religious backgrounds. This variation confirms the argument in multicultural education theory proposed by Banks (2008), which posits that tolerance and acceptance do not emerge automatically in diverse environments but instead require continuous social processes and learning. The present findings are also consistent with Tentiasih and Rifa'i (2022), who emphasize that the success of multicultural education depends largely on how diversity values are internalized through daily practices rather than solely through formal curricula.

Interstudent interactions in this study revealed notable dynamics. Some students described interreligious relationships as close and respectful, while others experienced tension, particularly when sensitive topics such as religious history emerged in discussions. The experience of minor conflict reported by one informant during a discussion about the story of the Prophet Adam illustrates how religious diversity, when not properly facilitated, can lead to misunderstandings. This phenomenon has also been documented by Sari et al. (2022), who argue that religious diversity in classrooms can serve as both a source of enriched perspectives and a trigger for conflict if teachers lack sufficient multicultural competence to mediate differences.

The school context examined in this study has, in fact, provided relatively adequate facilities to support religious diversity, including permission for daily prayers, religious study activities, and institutional support for students' religious expression. Notably, non-Muslim students were occasionally present or involved in these activities, indicating a form of active tolerance. This finding aligns with Mutiara et al. (2024), who found that schools implementing multicultural policies tend to cultivate inclusive school cultures, in which interreligious interactions are not merely passive but are actively facilitated through school programs.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal inconsistency in the role of teachers. While some students perceived teachers as fair and non-discriminatory, others reported experiences suggesting a lack of tolerance among certain teachers. This discrepancy contributes important insights to the literature, particularly in comparison with Harahap and Fata (2025), who portray teachers as ideal agents in fostering tolerance. The present study demonstrates that such ideal conditions are not always realized in practice. Variations in teachers' attitudes indicate that multicultural education cannot rely solely on curriculum design, but is also highly dependent on individual teachers' awareness, sensitivity, and capacity to understand diversity.

The expression of students' religious identities also emerged as a significant finding. Some students felt free to express their religious identities, such as wearing the hijab, leading prayers, or offering religious greetings. Conversely, other students did not feel entirely comfortable doing so. These differing experiences suggest that spaces of tolerance within schools are not evenly distributed, and that social dynamics continue to influence students' comfort in expressing their religious identities. This finding enriches existing literature, including the study by Rizqi et al. (2025), which notes that character education based on local wisdom can enhance tolerance, yet its effectiveness remains strongly influenced by school social conditions and peer interactions.

Overall, this study offers a novel perspective in the field of multicultural education. While prior research has largely emphasized curriculum, instructional strategies, or school policies as primary determinants, this study highlights students' subjective experiences in everyday social spaces as equally important. These experiences demonstrate that tolerance is not solely the outcome of formal learning processes, but rather a product of real interactions within school life—both harmonious interactions and those marked by tension.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial. Schools should ensure that religious facilities and activities are accompanied by systematic efforts to strengthen teachers' sensitivity in managing diversity. Teachers need targeted training to develop a deeper understanding of tolerance dynamics and to function effectively as mediators when students encounter differences that may lead to conflict.

Additionally, schools may consider developing more structured interfaith dialogue programs to help students learn to appreciate differences within safe and facilitated environments.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reaffirms that multicultural education should not be understood merely as a curriculum component, but as a social ecosystem involving interpersonal interactions and institutional practices. The findings regarding variations in students' perceptions and experiences may serve as a foundation for developing an experience-based multicultural education model, which remains underexplored in the Indonesian context.

For future research, comparative studies across schools with more diverse religious compositions are recommended, as well as research focusing specifically on teachers to better understand how multicultural competence is developed. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how students' tolerance evolves or changes throughout their years of schooling.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students' experiences in interacting with religious diversity in schools are complex and shaped by social dynamics embedded in everyday activities. While students generally recognize diversity as an inherent part of school life, their perceptions and experiences vary, ranging from feelings of comfort and mutual respect to moments of tension during religious discussions. These findings underscore that tolerance does not develop automatically in diverse environments, but rather emerges through processes that require institutional support, healthy social relationships, and teachers who are sensitive to diversity.

This study contributes to the literature on multicultural education by highlighting that the practice of tolerance in schools is not determined solely by curriculum or policy, but is also strongly influenced by students' personal experiences, the availability of religious facilities, and the consistency of teachers' attitudes. These findings enrich theoretical perspectives that position direct interstudent interaction as a crucial factor in the formation of tolerant attitudes. From a practical standpoint, the results emphasize the need for multicultural competency training for teachers, the strengthening of interfaith dialogue programs, and the development of inclusive school cultures to reinforce religious tolerance.

From a policy perspective, this study recommends that schools not only provide worship facilities but also establish structured mechanisms for fostering tolerance through learning activities, guidance and counseling services, and extracurricular programs. School policies should ensure that diversity values are implemented consistently by all educators and educational staff.

For future research, it is recommended to extend studies to school contexts with more heterogeneous religious compositions or larger samples to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of tolerance dynamics. Research focusing on teachers' multicultural competencies or longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insights into how students' tolerance attitudes develop and change over time.

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