



Building Tolerance Character through Interfaith Experiential Learning: The Peace Tour Program at Pesantren-Based School Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This study explores the role of interfaith experiential learning in fostering tolerant character among students at SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia Yogyakarta through the Peace Tour program. This qualitative research employs a phenomenological approach to uncover the lived experiences and religious reflections of students and teachers engaged in the Peace Tour program. The study involved three participants: one teacher and two students who directly participated in the activities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings show that Peace Tour serves as a transformative educational practice that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions through direct interaction with religious others. Students experienced a shift from initial discomfort to deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity, fostering inclusive attitudes and reinterpretations of Islamic values in the context of pluralism. The program's integration into the school's co-curricular activities and reflective discussions within the pesantren further reinforced Islamic values of rahmatan lil 'alamin. This study concludes that interfaith experiential learning can serve as a pedagogical tool to instill tolerance and moderate character, as well as offer a best-practice model for Islamic educational institutions in multicultural societies. These findings imply that the Peace Tour program can be replicated and adapted by educational institutions and policymakers as an experiential learning strategy to foster tolerance and strengthen religious moderation among students.

Keywords: character education, interfaith experiential learning, Islamic education, peace tour, tolerance

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A. Introduction

In the reality of Indonesian society that is diverse in religion, culture, and ethnicity, character education plays a vital role in developing values that support a peaceful and harmonious life together (Ekasari et al., 2025; Nugroho, 2016). Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has a strategic responsibility not only to teach religious knowledge, but also to develop a moderate, tolerant, and inclusive attitude in students from an early age (Djollong & Akbar, 2019). These values are highly relevant to strengthening social resilience in the face of potential conflicts arising from differences. In this context, tolerance becomes a key value to be developed through contextual educational approaches that engage students' personal dimension (Mumin, 2018).

On the other hand, several studies indicate that intolerant attitudes still frequently appear among students and also in the broader community. This phenomenon manifests as stereotypes toward different religious groups, resistance to specific religious activities, and exclusive tendencies in social interactions. This condition shows that some students still lack sufficient social skills and religious awareness to live in a plural society. Therefore, a more comprehensive educational intervention that engages real experiential dimensions is strongly needed.

However, in reality, many learning approaches in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are still textual and normative, so they do not reach the affective and practical domains of students (Candira et al., 2025; Suradi, 2018). Classroom learning is often not enough to give students real experiences for understanding diversity (Octavia, 2021). This situation has the potential to create a narrow view toward other groups. A pedagogical approach is needed that can connect religious understanding with multicultural social reality, so that the values of Islam as rahmatan lil 'alamin are not only concepts but also appear in the real behavior of students (Arifin et al., 2021).

Although many studies have discussed strategies for religious moderation and interfaith dialogue in schools, most still focus on cognitive approaches or pedagogical design. Only a few studies explore how students in pesantren-based schools subjectively interpret interfaith experiences, especially in relation to value internalization, affective dynamics, and their religious reflections. This gap is the foundation for this phenomenological study, which aims to capture how students understand, feel, and connect interfaith experiences to Islamic values in their everyday lives.

SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia in Yogyakarta respond to this challenge by implementing the Peace Tour program. This interfaith initiative provides students with direct experiences interacting with other religious communities. This program is not merely an extracurricular activity. Still, it is integrated into the curriculum through the Civics and Sociology subjects and supported by pesantren-based religious learning, which serves as an integrative environment for Islamic Religious Education (PAI).

With a phenomenological approach, this study aims to explore how students and teachers interpret the Peace Tour interfaith experience as a process of developing tolerance character. This research also aims to reveal how the experience contributes to the internalization of inclusive Islamic values in participants' daily lives. Therefore, the Peace Tour is not only a learning innovation but also provides a

character education model that can be applied in other Islamic educational institutions.

B. Literature Review

Studies on religious moderation and interfaith tolerance in education continue to grow, along with the increasing need to build a generation that can live side by side within diversity. In the school environment, religious moderation values are not only conveyed through textbooks but also through social practices, school culture, and students' direct experiences interacting with people of different religious backgrounds. The research of Muliawan & Muhajir (2025) indicates that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can be an effective way to grow tolerance awareness when its values are integrated into the curriculum, supported by digital media and interfaith extracurricular programs. These findings affirm that value-based religious learning can create space for dialogue and mutual respect, even though its implementation still faces challenges, including parental resistance and limited school resources.

In the pesantren context, the research of Yusuf & Makhzuniyah (2024) provides an interesting illustration of how non-Muslim students participating in an interfaith internship at a pesantren can internalize moderate attitudes. Through daily routines with santri, tafsir discussions, and interfaith interactions within the dormitory, the participants developed mutual respect and a deeper understanding of differences. These findings show that living together experiences in a pesantren provide a strong learning space for developing religious moderation. However, the context is still limited to adult university students rather than secondary school students.

Meanwhile, the research of Fahmi (2025) highlights that character education grounded in religious moderation is a crucial foundation for developing peaceful, inclusive students with strong moral sensitivity. The integration of justice, balance, and tolerance within school culture, supported by teachers who serve as role models, forms an essential educational strategy that requires continuous development. However, the study remains conceptual and has not yet provided a clear understanding of how students interpret interfaith encounters through real-life field experiences.

From the perspective of school leadership, the research by Harianto & Abdurrahman (2025) shows that principals who practice inclusive leadership can establish a safe, welcoming school environment that supports diversity. Through interreligious dialogue forums, collaborative interfaith activities, and fair approaches to conflict resolution, the principal encourages the development of a tolerant culture within the elementary school. However, this study focuses on leadership aspects and has not examined how students personally interpret their interfaith experiences, especially in Islamic boarding schools at the secondary education level.

A participatory training approach is also highlighted in the research by Suma et al (2025) Their study demonstrates that religious moderation training, which integrates reflective practices and interfaith dialogue, helps participants develop a more open and appreciative understanding of diversity. The results of the training indicate improved consistency among participants in applying religious moderation values. However, the training was conducted outside the formal education context, making it distinct from interfaith learning that is integrated into the school curriculum.

Other studies further reinforce the importance of pedagogical approaches that facilitate direct interfaith interaction. Religious moderation and interfaith tolerance are strategic issues in contemporary Islamic education. In the context of secondary education, A'yunin & Farih (2025) emphasize the effectiveness of the Jigsaw-type Cooperative Learning model in cultivating tolerant character among students. The model facilitates collaborative learning and inter-student dialogue across diverse religious backgrounds, grounded in Islamic Wasathiyah values such as tawassuth, ta'awun, and tasamuh. This approach is effective in cultivating empathy, fostering appreciation for diversity, and strengthening the understanding of universal humanitarian values.

On a broader scale, Zahra et al (2025) through a Systematic Literature Review, argue that religious moderation teaching strategies at the senior high school level should be systematically embedded within the curriculum, emphasizing interfaith dialogue, case-based learning, and experiential approaches. They highlight the crucial role of teachers as facilitators of dialogue and the responsibility of educational institutions to prevent intolerance through interactive pedagogical strategies. Nevertheless, the review remains theoretical and has not examined learners' direct experiences in applied interfaith learning.

In greater depth, Rahma et al (2024) describe the implementation of experiential learning within pesantren-based elementary education. The study reveals that interfaith student engagement in instructional activities can foster moderate, respectful attitudes. Daily habituation, shared discussions, and participation in classroom and dormitory settings further reinforce tolerant character among madrasah students. These findings highlight the strong potential of direct experience in cultivating inclusive values, although the study remains limited to the context of elementary education.

When these studies are examined collectively, it becomes apparent that religious moderation education has been explored from various perspectives, ranging from curriculum design and school leadership to habituation culture and participatory training approaches. Nevertheless, many existing studies remain theoretical or focus on experiences in elementary and higher education contexts. Limited research has investigated, in depth, the personal experiences of pesantren-based secondary school students when engaging in real interfaith activities.

From this point, a significant research gap appears: no study examines how senior high school students who live in a pesantren culture reflectively understand interfaith experiences in programs such as the Peace Tour, which combines curricular learning (Civics, Sociology, and P5 projects), interreligious dialogue, and pesantren mentoring. In practice, Islamic Religious Education values in this school are nurtured through the pesantren curriculum, encompassing diniyah studies, worship habituation, character reinforcement, and daily religious activities, ensuring that religious learning is not separated from students' lived educational experiences. The integration of school and pesantren curricula creates a distinctive learning space, where interfaith experiences are not only perceived socially and humanistically, but are also deeply connected to Islamic values embedded in students' everyday lives. Such experiences extend beyond the cognitive dimension, influencing emotional and spiritual development. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap through a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand how interfaith encounters shape students' inclusive, tolerant, and peace-oriented character.

C. Method

This research employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to examine the meanings of interfaith experiences encountered by students and teachers within the Peace Tour program at SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia Yogyakarta. The phenomenological approach was selected because it aligns with the research objective, namely, to gain an in-depth understanding of how learners and educators interpret cross-religious interactions as part of the process of cultivating tolerant and moderate character within Islamic educational contexts. The study was conducted at a pesantren-based secondary education institution that implements the Peace Tour program as an experiential model of interfaith learning, specifically SMA & Pesantren Bumi Cendekia Yogyakarta. The research participants consist of one principal serving as the activity coordinator and two students who participated in the program.

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Informant Code	Gender
1	INF-01	M
2	INF-02	F
3	INF-03	F

This study obtained ethical approval from the institution in which the research was conducted, and all informants provided informed consent before the interviews. The consent covers permission to use narrative quotations in scientific publications, as well as assurances of identity confidentiality through the use of anonymous coding.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and documentation of activities throughout the program. The interviews were employed to obtain a deep understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences of teachers and students. Documentation served as supporting evidence to reinforce interview findings and as material for data validation through triangulation. Observation was not carried out due to time constraints and because the Peace Tour had already concluded before the research began. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of three main stages: (1) data condensation, which simplifies, selects, and focuses relevant information; (2) data display, presented in an organized thematic narrative; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification based on recurring patterns, categories, and meanings identified during the research process.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source, method, and time triangulation, enabling scientifically and contextually accountable interpretation of findings. Furthermore, a member-check procedure was conducted with informants to validate interpretations of the interview results, and an audit trail was implemented to document the analytical process transparently and systematically.

D. Findings

Implementation of the Peace Tour Program in Interfaith Education

The Peace Tour program at SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia Yogyakarta was developed as a concrete model of interfaith education that emphasizes experiential learning in fostering tolerant attitudes. This initiative reflects the institution's awareness of the importance of cultivating students as peace agents who can

transcend religious identity boundaries. Notably, the program design is not merely top-down; rather, students are actively involved from the outset, including conceptual planning, partner correspondence, logistical management, and technical implementation in the field.

"Students participate actively from the beginning. They design the concept, communicate with partners, manage logistics, and execute the event on site. This activity also becomes a medium for nurturing responsibility, creativity, and leadership" (INF 01, personal communication, 2025).

This reflects a participatory approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions within character education grounded in diversity.

INF 01 (INF 01, personal communication, 2025) further described the implementation of the Peace Tour, which involved visits to diverse places of worship, including churches, monasteries, the Catholic Ignatius pesantren, Chinese community groups, and the Al-Fatah pesantren for transgender Muslims. These activities did not merely introduce religious differences symbolically but also broadened students' understanding of the social, cultural, and religious complexities embedded in a plural society. In group discussions and question-answer sessions, students were given opportunities to express curiosity and explore the universal values of goodness found across different religious traditions. This illustrates a dialogical approach that upholds equality and openness as foundational principles of interfaith interaction.

One of the principal strengths of the Peace Tour implementation lies in its curricular integration through Civics and Sociology courses, alongside reinforcement within the P5 project (Strengthening of Pancasila Student Profile). Consequently, the activity is not sporadic or incidental but forms part of a systematic character education strategy. Moreover, the pesantren environment plays a strategic role in internalizing interfaith experiences through reflective dialogue and deeper engagement with Islamic values grounded in rahmatan lil 'alamin. The collaboration between school and pesantren illustrates a synergy between formal and nonformal education in cultivating students' moderate character (INF 01, personal communication, 2025).

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Peace Tour is not without challenges, particularly in establishing collaboration with interfaith partners.

"The main challenge actually comes from our partners. Some of them initially expressed doubt or fear due to negative stereotypes associated with pesantren. They assumed that we were rigid or exclusive. However, after meeting and engaging in joint activities, they felt comfortable and enjoyed interacting with our students." (INF 01, personal communication, 2025).

Several partners initially demonstrated hesitation stemming from preconceived notions of the pesantren as an exclusive or closed institution. However, after participating in shared activities, they eventually felt comfortable and appreciated students' openness. This transformation of perception provides evidence that direct interaction has substantial power to dismantle stereotypes and foster inclusive social relationships.

Another challenge emerged from the reactions of several parents who initially expressed doubt. However, the school remained committed to the long-term values of tolerance education that it advocates (INF 01, personal communication, 2025). INF

01 further elaborated that the school addressed these challenges through communicative and collaborative strategies. By facilitating dialogue, designing contextual activities, and maintaining ethical and transparent communication with both partners and parents, the school successfully fostered trust and established sustainable partnerships.

Transformation of Students' Experiences in Interfaith Interaction

Direct interfaith interaction experiences through the Peace Tour program at SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia show a significant transformation in students' cognitive and affective domains. At the beginning of their participation, students showed enthusiasm but also felt awkward when facing visual and symbolic differences in other religious places of worship. "At first, it felt uncomfortable and strange with people from different religions, but after talking more often, we realized that we are all the same in interaction" (INF 03, personal communication, 2025). This shows that direct interaction becomes an essential trigger in breaking down social barriers that are unconsciously built.

The transformation of students' perceptions of diversity was further reinforced by the social dynamics of discussion sessions, visits, and question-and-answer activities. Group discussions, as noted by INF 02 (INF 02, personal communication, 2025) served as a turning point by providing space for reflection and the healthy exchange of perspectives: "We were able to share our viewpoints with mutual respect openly." Through dialogic engagement, students learned that diversity is not merely a social phenomenon but also an ethical learning arena that nurtures empathy and active listening skills.

Visits to places of worship such as churches, monasteries, and the Catholic Ignatius pesantren provided students with multisensory and emotional experiences that broadened their religious horizons. INF 01 (INF 01, personal communication, 2025) noted that several students entered a church and held a Bible for the first time. This experience later catalyzed a transformation in their perspectives toward other religions. The sense of wonder regarding shared foundational values among different faiths, as highlighted by INF 03, such as the restriction on menstruating women entering Confucian temples, which parallels Islamic tradition, illustrates the emergence of trans-religious awareness in understanding spirituality (INF 03, personal communication, 2025).

Interfaith interaction in the Peace Tour is not only symbolic but also helps shape deep, inclusive attitudes. Respect and openness become internalized values, as reflected in the statement of INF 02 (INF 02, personal communication, 2025) "I have become more appreciative of differences and do not quickly judge others based solely on their religion." Such attitudes do not emerge solely from normative discourse, but from existential experiences involving direct encounters with the other and the courage to engage in dialogue within a safe environment.

The cultivation of inclusive attitudes is further supported by reflective practices within the pesantren environment, where students are encouraged to link their interfaith encounters with Islamic teachings grounded in rahmatan lil 'alamin. The pesantren serves as a contemplative space that bridges social experiences with theological values, enabling students to avoid value disorientation and instead expand their Islamic worldview in a more transformative manner. This process demonstrates an integration between field-based experiences and contextual spiritual learning.

Therefore, the Peace Tour becomes a pedagogical practice that not only gives knowledge about diversity but also facilitates students' self-transformation. Through interfaith social interaction, shifts in perceptions of diversity, and the cultivation of practical, inclusive attitudes, the program addresses the need for character education that is relevant within multicultural contexts. The transformation that occurs is not temporary but has long-term potential to shape younger generations as interfaith peace agents.

Table 2. The Transformation of Students' Attitudes within Interfaith Interactions through the Peace Tour Program

No	Dimension of Transformation	Short Description	Supporting Quote
1	Cognitive	Students develop a broader and contextual understanding of religious pluralism.	"Initially, I was unfamiliar with their teachings, yet I discovered many shared values of goodness." (INF-02)
2	Affective	Students demonstrate mutual respect and interfaith empathy	"I have become more open and do not judge others quickly based on external appearances." (INF-02)
3	Spiritual	Reflection on Islamic values of rahmatan lil 'alamin is strengthened through interfaith dialogue.	"Differences are not an obstacle to forming friendship." (INF-03)

Students' Religious Reflection on Interfaith Experiences in the Pesantren Environment

Students' participation in the Peace Tour served as a turning point in their religious reflection, particularly in linking Islamic teachings with the lived reality of diversity. Students such as INF 03 observed that direct interactions with followers of other faiths dissolved initial feelings of awkwardness and fostered the realization that "differences are not an obstacle to friendship" (INF 03, personal communication, 2025). This expression does not merely reflect social experience but also represents a reinterpretation of inclusive Islamic values, in which Islam is not viewed strictly within the boundaries of its own community but as a teaching that recognizes the human disposition to coexist within universal goodness.

Deep reflection emerged when students realized that the basic principles of other religions share essential similarities with the values of Islam. INF 03, for instance, noted that the restriction on menstruating women entering Confucian places of worship parallels Islamic regulations, and that Catholic sisters also wear veils (INF 03, personal communication, 2025). This awareness illustrates a natural process of cognitive integration: students do not merely observe differences, but interpret them within the framework of Islamic teachings they have studied, particularly in the context of fiqh and social ethics. This represents a substantive form of reflection in which interfaith experiences serve as a mirror that strengthens, rather than challenges, students' religious convictions.

The pesantren serves as an essential space for nurturing and reinforcing this narrative of inclusivity. As stated by INF 01, following the Peace Tour activities, the pesantren facilitated discussions designed to contextualize students' experiences within the Islamic framework of rahmatan lil 'alamin (INF 01, personal communication, 2025). This process is not doctrinal in nature but dialogical, thereby

allowing students to articulate their emotions and understanding openly. Religious reflection becomes not only personal but also structured, guided, and directed toward the realization that Islam encourages peaceful coexistence with individuals of different faith traditions.

The integration of interfaith values with Islamic teachings becomes evident through shifts in students' orientations of thought. As stated by INF 02 (INF 02, personal communication, 2025), tolerance is now understood not merely as 'acceptance,' but as 'understanding, listening, and maintaining attitudes within diversity.' This indicates that the experience has transformed into functional values embedded within students, encompassing intellectual, affective, and moral dimensions. Students do not remain at the level of acknowledging pluralism but advance toward a practical commitment to building inclusive relationships as part of their religious responsibility.

E. Discussion

The findings on the implementation of the Peace Tour at SMA and Pesantren Bumi Cendekia Yogyakarta reveal that the program is not merely a symbolic visit to places of worship from other religious traditions, but a transformative pedagogical model that emphasizes experiential learning, active participation, and deep religious reflection (Ningsih & Zalisman, 2024). These findings have significant meaning in the context of character education based on diversity, because they show that interfaith interaction that is designed holistically can form tolerant attitudes that are not only conceptual, but also practical and personal in students (Anggal, 2024; Farisyaputra et al., 2025; Muslich, 2022).

Interfaith experiential learning contributes to the development of students' moderate character, supported by social constructivism theory (Vygotsky), which underscores the importance of social interaction and contextual experience in constructing meaning and values (Baruno et al., 2025; Sandra et al., 2025). The Peace Tour functions as an extended learning space beyond the classroom, enabling students to directly encounter the dynamics of diversity, which are subsequently contextualized through discussions and mentorship within the pesantren. This process reinforces the proposition that interfaith education is not merely a cognitive discourse, but an arena for cultivating moral values and a more inclusive religious identity (Sari, 2025; Solihin & Adnan, 2022).

The findings indicate that students experience a noticeable attitudinal transformation through multisensory and dialogical activities, with meaningful practical implications for the religious education curriculum. Evidence from the Peace Tour shows that religious learning limited to text-based instruction and classroom settings is less effective in building tolerance and openness (Faridah & Rizqi, 2025; Hanapi et al., 2025; Maqfirah, 2025). In contrast, experiential programs such as the Peace Tour can translate the Islamic value of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* into real practices that engage students' affective development (Wibisono et al., 2022). These implications highlight the need to reform Islamic Religious Education (PAI) by incorporating experiential learning models and interfaith collaboration.

In addition, the finding that some interfaith partners and parents expressed initial resistance shows that interfaith education still faces institutional stereotypes and prejudice. However, the school's ability to respond to these challenges through dialogical approaches, open communication, and curriculum integration demonstrates the importance of transformative and communicative school

leadership. Therefore, the Peace Tour also confirms the proposition that social change and the development of inclusive character in educational contexts can only be achieved through strong synergy between institutional policies, school culture, and community support (Iswahyudi et al., 2023; Mulyono, 2025).

More broadly, the Peace Tour contributes to the contemporary discourse of Islamic education that views tolerance not as an ideological compromise, but as an expression of a more profound understanding of Islamic teachings themselves (Nafi', 2018). Students' reflections that connect their interfaith experiences with Islamic jurisprudence and ethical values indicate that diversity can serve as a medium for strengthening religious identity rather than threatening it (Ramdhan et al., 2025; Suprpto, 2023). This challenges the proposition of religious exclusivism that persists in some conservative Islamic education narratives and, instead, highlights the importance of building contextual and transformative Islamic narratives.

Thus, the Peace Tour not only provides new learning experiences for students, but also demonstrates how pesantren can play an important role in deepening the formation of moderate character. Within the pesantren environment, students' interfaith experiences are guided through mentoring and reflective spaces that allow them to connect social encounters with Islamic values in a more grounded and meaningful way (Mukhlisin & Sofy, 2025). The Peace Tour is not merely a recreational activity; it becomes part of an educational design that positions diversity as a real learning resource. Through this process, students do not stop at initial impressions or feelings of curiosity, but move toward a more profound understanding and internalization of the fact that Islam brings mercy to all creation. Pesantren mentoring transforms interfaith experiences into honest conversations, mature reflection, and a more responsible attitude in viewing differences (Huda et al., 2024). Therefore, the Peace Tour can be seen as an effective educational practice for fostering moderate attitudes and may serve as a valuable reference for other schools that aim to develop experience-based character education in increasingly diverse societies.

F. Conclusion

This study shows that the Peace Tour can be an effective program for instilling values of tolerance in students through real-life experiences. Students can directly observe the religious practices of other communities, which expands their insight and helps them become more inclusive individuals. Interfaith experiential programs like this can also be replicated and adapted by government institutions or other organizations as an educational model that provides both knowledge and practical experience in nurturing tolerance and strengthening attitudes of moderation. Ultimately, students can contribute as agents of peace within the diverse Indonesian society and beyond. This study has limitations, as it was conducted in a single institution with a limited number of informants. Future research can be conducted as a follow-up study by involving additional schools to obtain more comprehensive findings. Quantitative research is also needed to provide more concrete evidence on the effectiveness of the Peace Tour program.

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