

Negotiating Religious and Cultural Tolerance through Intercultural Encounters in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

Religious and cultural tolerance in faith-based education is often examined through curriculum, leadership, and institutional values, while less attention has been paid to how tolerance is practiced through daily encounters with religious and cultural differences. This study examined how tolerance was cultivated at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, where Muslim students and educators interacted with non-Muslim foreign teachers and international participants. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from January to October 2024 through semi-structured interviews with 26 purposively selected participants, classroom and extracurricular observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically and triangulated across sources. The findings showed that tolerance was practiced through the interaction of tolerance-related curriculum, everyday encounters with foreign educators, extracurricular and international activities, and institutional support. These encounters occurred within maintained Islamic institutional boundaries and were not uniformly accepted, as concerns from some teachers and parents revealed continuing negotiations over religious differences. The study conceptualized tolerance as an institutional-relational process in which institutional arrangements structured opportunities for intercultural contact, while everyday relationships gave tolerance a concrete social form. The findings contribute to discussions of tolerance in Islamic and faith-based education by demonstrating how engagement with religious difference can occur within a clearly defined religious environment without requiring the suspension of institutional identity.

A. Introduction

Religious intolerance is not merely a matter of disagreement over belief; when prejudice is normalized and differences are poorly negotiated, it can develop into discrimination, social exclusion, and even collective violence (Taufiq & Said, 2025). Indonesia has experienced how religious and ethnic boundaries can become entangled with violent conflict, including episodes in Poso, Ambon, and other parts of the archipelago (Aragon, 2001; Van Klinken, 2007; Schulze, 2017). Such experiences make tolerance an urgent educational concern rather than an abstract moral ideal (Alazeez et al., 2024; Mursyid et al., 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2025). Education is therefore expected not only to teach respect for diversity but also to provide meaningful encounters through which young people learn to live with religious and cultural differences (Raihani, 2014, 2018; Syarif et al., 2024; Wijaya Mulya & Aditomo, 2019). This challenge is increasingly significant as citizenship itself is shaped by mobility, cultural plurality, and interactions across religious and national boundaries (Banks, 2008; Franch, 2020; Mahfud et al., 2024).

Within this context, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) occupy a particularly important position. *Pesantren* are not only institutions of religious instruction but also social environments in which students develop moral orientations, collective identities, and patterns of civic engagement (Suyanta et al., 2024; Roqib et al., 2025). Their educational influence extends beyond formal religious knowledge because everyday routines, authority relations, peer interactions, and institutional cultures contribute to students' understandings of social and religious differences (Hefner, C.-M., 2019; Pohl, 2006; Salim et al., 2024). Previous scholarship has shown that *pesantren* can promote moderation, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence through leadership, curriculum, and institutional culture (Ma'arif et al., 2025; Maksum, 2015; Mursyid, 2016; Sumadi, 2021; Syabuddin et al., 2026). This places *pesantren* at an important intersection between maintaining Islamic identity and preparing students to participate constructively in increasingly diverse societies.

The issue becomes more complex when religious and cultural diversity enters the *pesantren* itself through foreign educators, international programs, and sustained encounters with non-Muslims (Suyanta et al., 2024; Syabuddin et al., 2026). Tolerance in such circumstances is no longer simply a value discussed in Civics or religious education; it becomes a lived relationship requiring students, teachers, and institutions to negotiate difference in everyday practice (Salim et al., 2024). Research on religious education

suggests that meaningful engagement with difference can influence how students understand religious identities and diversity (Jackson, 2008; Von der Lippe, 2011), while educational interventions can also reduce religious prejudice when tolerance is translated into actual learning experiences (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Ferrara, 2012). These insights make direct intercultural encounters within faith-based education particularly important to investigate (Saenong, 2025; Mursyid et al., 2024).

Existing studies provide important foundations for understanding tolerance within Indonesian Islamic education. Raihani (2014) demonstrates that tolerance becomes meaningful when embedded in the wider culture of schooling, while Maksum (2015) and Mursyid (2016) emphasize the contribution of *pesantren* leadership, curriculum, and institutional design to tolerant orientations. Latif (2021) further demonstrates the development of multicultural attitudes within an Indonesian Islamic boarding school, and Sumadi (2021) highlights the transformation of tolerance values within Salafi *pesantren* education. Comparative evidence also indicates that students' religious tolerance can vary across public-school and *pesantren* environments, reinforcing the importance of institutional context in shaping attitudes toward religious difference (Mappiasse & Hayadin, 2022). Collectively, these studies challenge monolithic representations of *pesantren* and demonstrate their diverse responses to pluralism.

Nevertheless, a critical gap remains. Much of the existing literature explains tolerance through curriculum, leadership, parental socialization, institutional values, or students' attitudes (Ma'arif et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2024; Syabuddin et al., 2026), while considerably less is known about what happens when religious difference becomes part of everyday interpersonal life inside a *pesantren*. In particular, limited attention has been given to *pesantren* in which Muslim students and teachers engage repeatedly with non-Muslim foreign educators and international participants through classroom and extracurricular activities. Consequently, existing scholarship provides insufficient explanation of how members of a faith-based educational community experience, negotiate, and respond to religious and cultural differences when such difference becomes part of their routine educational environment. This leaves a gap between understanding tolerance as an institutional or pedagogical commitment and understanding how it operates as an everyday social practice.

Intergroup contact theory provides a useful conceptual lens for examining this neglected process. Allport (1954) argues that meaningful interaction across group boundaries can reduce prejudice under supportive conditions, while subsequent

research shows that sustained contact can foster empathy, reduce intergroup anxiety, and strengthen mutual trust (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Schweitzer (2007) similarly emphasizes educational encounters that allow religious differences to be recognized without requiring participants to abandon their identities. These perspectives allow tolerance within *pesantren* to be examined relationally, while also connecting such encounters to broader educational concerns with cultural plurality, multiple identities, and participation across cultural boundaries that underpin multicultural and global citizenship education (Banks, 2008; Oxley & Morris, 2013; Franch, 2020; Mujiburrohman & Faqih, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from the institutional transmission of tolerance to the relational processes through which tolerance is enacted in everyday *pesantren* life. Rather than examining tolerance primarily through curriculum, leadership, or institutional values, this study focuses on how it is experienced and negotiated through sustained encounters among Muslim students, Muslim educators, and non-Muslim foreign teachers. The case of Ummushabri therefore offers a distinctive perspective on tolerance as a lived educational practice emerging through the interaction of religious identity, intercultural contact, and institutional support.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how religious and cultural tolerance is cultivated at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School through everyday intercultural encounters. It specifically examines how tolerance is practiced through learning and extracurricular activities, how participants respond to religious and cultural differences, and what institutional conditions support or constrain these processes.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how cultural and religious tolerance is cultivated through everyday interactions at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School in Southeast Sulawesi. The unit of analysis comprised intercultural and interreligious encounters among students, teachers, and foreign educators within the *pesantren* environment. The case was selected purposively because Ummushabri represents an atypical *pesantren* model that combines Islamic education with international learning initiatives, foreign educators from different religious and cultural backgrounds, and recurring opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. This design enabled the study to examine tolerance as a context-dependent and relational educational practice rather than merely as an individual attitude or formally prescribed value.

The participants consisted of 26 individuals selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the school's pedagogical, organizational, and intercultural activities. They comprised 13 teachers (eight men and five women), three members of the school foundation, and 10 students. The students were purposively selected because they had direct experience with learning and extracurricular activities involving intercultural encounters, including interactions with foreign educators and participation in relevant school programs. The teacher group included several foreign teachers from the United States with non-Muslim backgrounds, enabling the study to capture perspectives shaped by distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious identities. This participant composition provided perspectives from institutional leaders, educators, and students who experienced the school's tolerance-building practices from different positions.

Data were collected from January to October 2024 using three complementary techniques: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) classroom and extracurricular observations, and (3) document analysis. The interviews explored participants' experiences, interpretations, and reflections on how tolerance was enacted in daily school life. Observations were conducted in classrooms and school activities to examine actual patterns of intercultural interaction. Documents including curriculum outlines, teacher assignments, school policies, activity reports, photographs, and institutional records of earlier intercultural and international programs were analyzed to triangulate and contextualize the findings. Earlier activities documented in these materials were treated as historical and documentary evidence rather than as direct observations conducted during the 2024 fieldwork. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian or English according to participants' preference and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process of familiarization, data organization, coding, theme development, and interpretive refinement. Interview transcription followed the methodological considerations outlined by Widodo (2014). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were repeatedly examined and coded according to recurring patterns concerning learning practices, intercultural encounters, participants' responses to difference, and institutional conditions supporting or constraining tolerance. Codes were compared across the three data sources and subsequently organized into broader themes corresponding to the research objectives. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents was used to examine

convergence and divergence among the evidence, while member checking with selected participants was conducted to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research objectives, procedures, risks, and confidentiality measures before participation. Written and verbal consent were obtained, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, and potentially identifying information was removed. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data reporting were maintained throughout the research process.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion in two complementary parts. The results first report the empirical patterns identified from the data, while the discussion subsequently interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant scholarship. This structure distinguishes the presentation of empirical evidence from its broader analytical and conceptual interpretation.

1. Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on interviews, observations, and document reviews conducted at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School in Southeast Sulawesi between January and October 2024. The data are organized into thematic categories that describe how intercultural encounters occurred in daily school life, how students and teachers interacted with foreign educators, and how various school programs facilitated exposure to cultural and religious diversity. Across the three data sources, four interconnected patterns emerged: tolerance embedded in learning activities, extracurricular spaces for intercultural encounters, institutional factors supporting or constraining tolerance, and participants' responses to religious and cultural differences.

a. Cultivating Religious and Cultural Tolerance in Learning Activities

The data indicate that cultural and religious tolerance at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School was cultivated through daily educational practices observed between January and October 2024. Interview, observation, and documentary data consistently located these practices within curriculum implementation, classroom interaction, encounters with foreign educators, and routine activities within the *pesantren* environment.

Interview data show that tolerance-related content was incorporated into Civics Education (PPKn) and Islamic Religious Education. Teachers reported that they linked lesson materials with themes such as respect, cooperation, and empathy. Classroom observations confirmed that several lessons included examples of interpersonal respect, intergroup harmony, and cooperative behaviour. These observations corresponded with teachers' accounts of integrating tolerance into formal learning, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Integration of Religious and Cultural Tolerance Education in Learning

Informant	Statement
NH	"Religious and cultural tolerance is often fostered at the Kendari Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School. For example, the integration of Civics learning materials includes tolerance materials."
RA	"The existence of scientific integration in Citizenship Education subjects."
BS	"The tolerance culture is integrated into Civics and Religion learning materials and then applied to behaviour and attitudes. Each stakeholder provides concrete example of tolerant attitudes."

(Interviews with NH, RA, and BS, 2024)

The statements in Table 1 show a consistent pattern across the three teacher accounts: tolerance was incorporated into formal learning rather than treated solely as an extracurricular concern. The interview evidence was reinforced by classroom observations showing that respect, cooperation, and harmonious interaction were addressed through examples and learning activities.

In addition to curriculum use, the presence of foreign teachers constituted another site of daily intercultural contact. Administration documents and interviews recorded that Ummushabri employed several non-Muslim, non-permanent teachers from the United States to support the bilingual program. Administrators stated that permanent teachers were Muslim, while non-permanent foreign teachers were recruited to enrich educational exposure. An administrator described the institutional approach to cultural expression among teachers as follows: *"Every teacher is allowed to express themselves according to the culture of their area of origin as long as they do not conflict with the rules of the Ummushabri Foundation employees."* (Interview with AF, 2024)

This account indicates that cultural expression was permitted within defined institutional boundaries. The school therefore provided room for cultural difference while maintaining behavioral expectations associated with the institutional environment.

Observations showed that some foreign teachers adopted local practices while on campus, including the use of the hijab during teaching activities. A foreign teacher

described this adaptation as a way of respecting the cultural and religious environment of the school:

"From what I experienced, Ummushabri showed respect and tolerance towards me, but there was no opportunity to share differences in religion or culture that required another response. For example, as a way of showing respect for Islamic boarding schools, I wear the hijab and try to respect cultural differences by aligning myself with the way Ummushabri teaches children" (Interview with KT, 2024).

The statement was consistent with field observations documenting the teacher's use of the hijab during school activities. This convergence between interview and observational evidence demonstrates a visible form of adaptation within everyday interaction between foreign educators and the *pesantren* environment. Figure 1 documents one instance of a foreign teacher wearing a hijab during classroom instruction.



Figure 1. Foreign teacher wearing hijab while teaching at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School

Extracurricular activities also provided settings where students encountered cultural differences. Students and teachers reported that the annual Ummushabri Expo featured cultural performances, exhibitions, and interactive sessions involving Indonesian and foreign educators. A student described direct exposure to cultural diversity during the event: *"During the Expo, we can see performances from different cultures, and even some of the foreign teachers participate."* (Interview with SR, 2024).

This account shows that students encountered cultural difference through participation and observation within school activities, rather than exclusively through formal classroom content.

Documentary records reviewed during the 2024 fieldwork further showed that Ummushabri participated in the International Culture Exchange Camp in Bangkok from

2017 to 2019. Students interacted with peers from Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Interviews with school leaders indicated that Filipino students initially expressed fear due to stereotypes about *pesantren*. A school leader recalled the reception of these students:

"When they come to Ummushabri, they are afraid because of the stigma and bad relationship between religion and Muslims in the Philippines. But once inside, they are greeted with a warm welcome; the children line up and are immediately greeted with handshakes and hugs, making them feel welcome." (Interview with HM, 2024)

The account documents an initial condition of apprehension followed by direct social interaction during the program. It also provides historical evidence of how international participants were received within the school environment.

The same informant reported another practice that occurred during the international exchange. He explained that several Filipino female participants voluntarily adapted their clothing while entering the *pesantren*: *"On the second day until the ninth day, the Filipino girls wore the hijab every time they entered the Islamic boarding school, and it was done without coercion."* (Interview with HM, 2024)

This recollection adds documentary context to the school's earlier intercultural activities and records how visiting participants responded to local religious practices during their stay. Figure 2 displays interactions between Ummushabri students and international participants during the Bangkok camp.



Figure 2. Ummushabri students interacting with international peers in Bangkok (2017)

Classroom observations produced additional evidence of everyday intercultural engagement. Students were seen greeting foreign teachers, assisting with translation when needed, and participating in lessons involving cultural storytelling. In one

observed English lesson, the teacher opened with a narrative from her hometown, after which students responded by sharing similar experiences from their own context. Assignments collected during the study included reflective tasks in which students wrote about cooperation, empathy, and respect.

Student interviews supported these observations. One student described how learning with a non-Muslim foreign teacher affected his perception of religious difference: *"Before, I only studied with Muslim teachers, but here I also learn with foreign teachers. They are not Muslims, but they respect us. It makes me think that we should also respect them."* (Interview with SA, July 2024)

The statement shows that the student connected the experience of receiving respect from a religiously different teacher with the need to reciprocate that respect. This pattern was also visible in routine interactions recorded during classroom observation.

Another student emphasized that these encounters occurred through ordinary daily practices rather than exceptional events: *"We greet the foreign teachers, help them when they need translation, and they also respect our religious activities."* (Interview with RF, June 2024).

This account corresponds with observations of students assisting foreign teachers and interacting with them during lessons and informal activities, providing evidence that intercultural contact was embedded in routine school life. The institutional orientation toward these activities was also evident in interviews with school leadership. The chairman connected the recruitment of foreign educators with the school's broader orientation toward international engagement: *"We want Ummushabri to be a modern pesantren that can interact with the global community. For that reason, we bring in native speakers, and we encourage students to be open to differences."* (Interview with HM, 2024)

The statement confirms that the presence of foreign educators was not incidental but formed part of the school's institutional direction toward broader intercultural engagement.

Participant demographic data (Table 2) indicate linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity among the adult participants, including three foreign teachers with Christian and Catholic backgrounds. The table presents the 16 adult participants, 13 teachers and three foundation members, for whom detailed demographic information was recorded. The 10 student participants are not individually identified in order to maintain their anonymity.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Name (anonymous)	Position	Gender	Ages (years)	Religion	Ethnic group	Citizen
Aren	Teacher	Male	56	Follower of Allah	Germans & Brits	USA
Kimci	Teacher	Female	61	Christian	-	USA
Edi	Teacher	Female	53	Christian	American	USA
Ng	Teacher	Male	28	Islam	Muna	Indonesia
Base	Teacher	Male	29	Islam	Buton	Indonesia
Imus	Teacher	Female	30	Islam	Tomia	Indonesia
Muse	Teacher	Male	30	Islam	Buton	Indonesia
Reza	Teacher	Female	27	Islam	Muna	Indonesia
Muda	Teacher	Male	32	Islam	Muna	Indonesia
Nure	Teacher	Female	29	Islam	Bugis	Indonesia
Baso	Teacher	Male	33	Islam	Javanese	Indonesia
Laku	Teacher	Male	44	Islam	Muna	Indonesia
Rase	Teacher	Male	28	Islam	Sunda- Tolaki	Indonesia
Imtaq	Foundation	Male	30	Islam	Makassar	Indonesia
Keti	Foundation	Female	48	Islam	Bugis	Indonesia
Aan	Foundation	Male	50	Islam	Javanese	Indonesia

Across interviews, observations, and documents, the evidence therefore identifies several interconnected sites of tolerance practice: formal curriculum, teacher–student interaction, everyday contact with foreign educators, and intercultural school programs. The convergence of these sources shows that religious and cultural differences was encountered repeatedly within both instructional and social activities.

b. Extracurricular Programs as Platforms of Tolerance

Data from interviews, observations, and documents show that extracurricular programs at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School served as recurring settings where students encountered cultural and religious differences through shared activities and performances. The data identified the Ummushabri Expo, international exchange programs, scouting activities, student council activities, and the English debate club as prominent settings for these encounters.

One of the most prominent activities was the annual Ummushabri Expo. Documentary records showed students presenting traditional dances, musical performances, and academic exhibitions, with foreign teachers participating in several cultural activities. A student described the significance of these encounters from a

participant's perspective: "During the Expo, we can see performances from different cultures, and even some of the foreign teachers participate. It helps us to understand that being different is normal and something to be respected." (Interview with DN, 2024)

The student's account corresponds with documentary evidence of joint cultural performances and indicates that cultural difference was directly encountered through shared activities. Figure 3 shows one of the documented moments during the Expo when students performed traditional dances alongside foreign teachers.



Figure 3. Cultural performances at the Ummushabri Expo involving students and foreign teachers (2019)

Beyond the Expo, international exchange programs created additional spaces for interaction. Between 2017 and 2019, Ummushabri participated in the International Culture Exchange Camp in Bangkok, Thailand. Documentary records reviewed during the 2024 research documented interactions with participants from Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Reflecting on these earlier programs, the chairman described how some Filipino participants initially approached the *pesantren* with apprehension:

"When they come to Ummushabri, they are afraid because of the stigma and bad relationship between religion and Muslims in the Philippines. But once inside, they are greeted with a warm welcome; the children line up and are immediately greeted with handshakes and hugs, making them feel welcome." (Interview with HM, 2024)

This recollection documents the contrast between participants' initial apprehension and their subsequent reception through direct interaction with the school community.

Daily extracurricular activities also provided consistent opportunities for intercultural interaction. Observation records show that scouting events, student

council activities, and religious celebrations occasionally included participation from foreign teachers or international guests. In one scouting camp, foreign teachers introduced games from their cultural backgrounds, which were incorporated into group activities prepared by students. These records show that intercultural contact was not restricted to major international events but also occurred within routine extracurricular activities.

Another program frequently mentioned in interviews was the English debate club facilitated by foreign teachers. Observations showed that students practiced presenting arguments, responding to differing viewpoints, and participating in group discussions. A teacher associated these direct encounters with visible changes in students' confidence and openness: *"Students here are proud when they can host international guests. They become more confident, more respectful, and more open to others. This is very different from just reading about tolerance in textbooks."* (Interview with AR, 2024)

The teacher's account indicates that direct participation was perceived as producing experiences different from classroom-based instruction alone. Observation records of student discussions and interactions with foreign teachers supported this account. A student similarly described a change from initial nervousness to greater familiarity after participating in intercultural activities: *"Before, I was nervous to talk to foreigners because I thought they were very different. But when we joined the camp, I realized that they are just like us, and we can laugh and learn together."* (Interview with FA, 2024)

The student's account provides evidence of a shift in response following direct interaction and shared activity, a pattern also found in several other student interviews. School leadership further confirmed that these programs formed part of the institutional agenda. The chairman explained the intended role of international and extracurricular activities:

"We want Ummushabri to be a modern pesantren that can interact with the global community. For that reason, we encourage participation in international programs and design extracurricular activities that expose students to diversity." (Interview with HM, 2024)

Taken together, interview, observation, and documentary evidence shows that extracurricular programs provided repeated opportunities for interaction across cultural and religious boundaries through performances, collaborative tasks, informal communication, and international exchanges.

c. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Tolerance

Data from interviews and observations show that tolerance at Ummushabri developed within a combination of supporting and inhibiting conditions. Supporting conditions included institutional openness, curricular integration, recurring intercultural programs, and students' willingness to engage with foreign educators. In contrast, reservations among some teachers, parents, and community members constituted constraints on these initiatives.

Interviews with foundation members indicated that openness to diversity formed part of the institutional direction. Administrators described recruiting foreign teachers, facilitating international programs, and involving students in activities with culturally and religiously different participants. One administrator reported that more than a dozen foreign educators had visited Ummushabri over a three-year period, with some visits occurring monthly. This account, together with institutional documentation, indicates that exposure to foreign educators occurred repeatedly rather than as an isolated event.

Teachers also described the integration of tolerance-related content into Civics Education and Islamic Religious Education. Classroom materials addressed respect, cooperation, and diversity, while extracurricular programs provided opportunities to encounter these differences directly. Observation records further documented students assisting foreign teachers with translation and participating in cultural demonstrations. Student interviews likewise showed enthusiasm for learning about different languages and cultures, reinforcing the pattern found in the observational data.

However, institutional openness was not uniformly accepted. Interview data recorded concerns among some teachers and parents regarding the involvement of non-Muslims in the *pasantren*. A foundation member recalled a particularly strong reaction after inviting a non-Muslim public figure to the school:

"I once brought Hari Tanoesudibyo to Ummushabri at the wish of some parents, but teachers even bullied me. I was bullied either directly or indirectly and accused of being secular for bringing infidels into the Islamic Boarding School environment." (Interview with HM, 2024)

The account provides direct evidence that intercultural openness could generate internal resistance. It also shows that differences of opinion existed within the institution regarding the appropriate boundaries of engagement with non-Muslims.

Some parents were also reported to have expressed hesitation regarding foreign teachers. Administrators stated that several parents questioned the need for non-Muslim educators and raised concerns about their potential influence on students. According to interview accounts, administrators responded by explaining that foreign educators taught non-religious subjects and operated within the school's institutional rules.

Teachers further reported that stereotypes concerning foreigners occasionally appeared in conversations with parents and community members. The evidence therefore shows that institutional initiatives supporting intercultural contact operated alongside religious concerns and social reservations rather than in an environment of unanimous acceptance.

Observation data suggest that these concerns became less prominent as interaction with foreign educators became more routine. Several teachers and administrators reported that students' positive interactions with foreign teachers helped reduce hesitation among some staff and parents. Across the data, supporting and inhibiting conditions therefore existed simultaneously: institutional policies and repeated contact facilitated interaction, while religious concerns and pre-existing perceptions sometimes constrained acceptance.

d. Responses of Teachers and Students to Intercultural Encounters

Interview and observation data show a range of responses toward intercultural encounters at Ummushabri. The most recurrent responses included initial hesitation, curiosity, gradual familiarity, reciprocal accommodation, and increasing willingness to interact across religious and cultural differences. These responses were visible among Muslim teachers, students, and foreign educators.

Several teachers reported initial hesitation about the involvement of non-Muslim educators in the *pesantren*. They questioned how foreign teachers would adapt to institutional routines and religious expectations. One teacher described how this perception changed after observing the conduct of foreign educators:

"At first I was doubtful about whether non-Muslims could be good role models for our students, but after seeing their commitment to respecting our rules and culture, I realized that they are teaching our children not only English but also the meaning of respect." (Interview with MR, 2024)

The statement shows a transition from doubt to acceptance based on observed behaviour rather than prior assumptions. Similar accounts from other teachers indicated that familiarity developed through repeated interaction.

Foreign educators also described adaptation from their own perspective. One foreign teacher explained how she adjusted her behaviour and appearance to the religious environment of the school:

"From what I experienced, Ummushabri showed respect and tolerance towards me, but there was no opportunity to share differences in religion or culture that required another response. For example, as a way of showing respect for Islamic boarding schools, I wear the hijab and try to respect cultural differences by aligning myself with the way Ummushabri teaches children." (Interview with KT, 2024)

Observation records supported this account by documenting foreign teachers wearing the hijab on campus and participating in activities according to *pesantren* norms. The interview and observational evidence therefore converged on adaptation as a recurring feature of everyday intercultural interaction. The impressions of the three foreign teachers are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Impressions of Foreign Teachers while Teaching at Ummushabri

Informant	Statement
FT1	"Teaching here makes me realize that tolerance is not only taught but lived. I feel welcomed, and I also try to respect the school's culture."
FT2	"From what I experienced, Ummushabri showed respect and tolerance towards me. As a way of showing respect, I wear the hijab and try to align myself with the way the school teaches children."
FT3	"Students here are very open. They are curious, respectful, and always ready to help me when I struggle with the language. It makes me feel part of the community."

(Interviews with FT1, FT2, and FT3, 2024)

The three accounts show a common pattern of perceived acceptance accompanied by adaptation to the school environment. They also correspond with observation records showing interaction, language assistance, and participation in everyday school activities.

Students described comparable changes in their responses. Several reported feeling nervous when first interacting with foreign teachers. One student explained how direct experience challenged his previous perception of non-Muslim educators: *"Before, I only studied with Muslim teachers, but here I also learn with foreign teachers. They are not Muslims, but they respect us. It makes me think that we should also respect them."* (Interview with SA, July 2024)

The student's account indicates that reciprocal respect emerged from direct experience with a religiously different teacher. Another student located tolerance in routine

interaction rather than formal instruction alone: *"We greet the foreign teachers, help them when they need translation, and they also respect our religious activities. This is how we practice tolerance daily."* (Interview with RF, June 2024)

This statement was supported by classroom observations documenting students approaching foreign teachers, assisting with language difficulties, and exchanging cultural information during lessons and informal communication. Students also reflected on earlier international exchange experiences recorded in institutional documents. One student recalled moving from nervousness to greater familiarity when interacting with international peers: *"I was nervous to talk to foreigners at first, but after the camp I realized that we can laugh and learn together."* (Interview with FA, 2024, reflecting on the earlier international exchange experience)

The account reinforces the pattern found across the student data: unfamiliarity was frequently reported at the beginning of intercultural encounters, while greater comfort emerged after direct participation in shared activities. The chairman similarly described students' responses as an indicator of the school's institutional orientation. He linked students' interaction with foreign participants to the school's broader objective of international engagement:

"We want Ummushabri to be a modern pesantren that can interact with the global community. When we see our students welcoming foreigners, learning from them, and respecting them, we know that our vision is being realized." (Interview with HM, 2024)

Across teacher, student, foreign-teacher, observational, and documentary data, the strongest recurring pattern was movement from unfamiliarity or hesitation toward more routine and reciprocal interaction. However, the evidence also shows that these encounters occurred within established *pesantren* norms. Religious and cultural tolerance was therefore observed through everyday interaction, mutual accommodation, and participation in shared activities while institutional religious boundaries remained visible.

2. Discussion

The findings show that tolerance at Ummushabri was embedded in several interconnected dimensions of school life rather than confined to explicit instruction about religious or cultural differences. Tolerance-related content appeared in Civics and Religious Education, while students also encountered differences through foreign teachers, extracurricular activities, and international programs. The significance of this pattern lies

in the correspondence between what the school formally taught, and the social situations students encountered in everyday educational settings. Raihani (2014) similarly emphasizes the importance of school culture in tolerance education, while studies of Indonesian *pesantren* identify curriculum, leadership, and institutional orientation as important contexts for cultivating tolerance (Maksum, 2015; Mursyid, 2016; Sumadi, 2021). The present findings extend this literature by showing how institutional commitments to tolerance acquired practical meaning through recurring encounters with religious and cultural differences.

Encounters with non-Muslim foreign teachers gave such difference a concrete presence in everyday educational relationships. Students interacted with these teachers through lessons, informal communication, translation assistance, and school activities, while some students and teachers described becoming more comfortable after initial uncertainty. This pattern can be interpreted through intergroup contact theory, which emphasizes that the consequences of contact depend on the conditions and social contexts in which interaction occurs (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011). At Ummushabri, repeated interaction did not remove religious distinctions; instead, it provided direct interpersonal experiences through which previously unfamiliar relationships became part of ordinary school life. The finding therefore supports a cautious interpretation of contact as creating opportunities for engagement with difference rather than demonstrating that contact itself reduced prejudice.

These encounters depended substantially on the institutional environment in which they occurred. School leaders recruited foreign educators, supported international programs, and provided spaces for intercultural interaction, while foreign teachers were expected to respect established *pesantren* norms. Administrators also responded to parental concerns by clarifying the educational roles assigned to non-Muslim teachers. Such arrangements reflect the diversity of Indonesian *pesantren*, whose engagement with social and religious plurality is shaped by particular institutional cultures and educational orientations (Hefner, C.-M., 2019; Latif, 2021; Pohl, 2006; Raihani, 2014; Roqib et al., 2025; Syarif et al., 2024). Ummushabri illustrates a configuration in which openness to religious difference operated alongside the maintenance of Islamic institutional norms (Kurniawan et al., 2025). Tolerance was therefore not produced by suspending religious boundaries, but by creating spaces for interaction within them.

The adaptation of foreign teachers makes this relationship between interaction and institutional boundaries particularly visible. Practices such as wearing the *hijab* on campus

and following school routines represented accommodation to the host environment rather than the disappearance of religious differences. This distinction matters because tolerance does not require religious or cultural sameness. Scholarship on religious education emphasizes the importance of engaging differences while recognizing the continuing significance of religious identities and contexts (Jackson, 2008; Mahfud et al., 2024; Schweitzer, 2007). Research on young people's engagement with religious diversity similarly shows that encounters with difference involve interpretation and negotiation rather than simple acceptance of abstract pluralism (Von der Lippe, 2011; Saenong, 2025). At Ummushabri, religious differences remained visible, but they did not prevent routine educational interaction. Tolerance was thus expressed through the practical negotiation of coexistence across maintained religious boundaries.

Extracurricular activities widened the settings in which such encounters occurred. The Ummushabri Expo, debate activities, scouting, and documented international exchanges involved communication, shared activities, and engagement with different cultural backgrounds beyond formal classroom instruction. Their educational significance lies in allowing students to encounter diversity through participation rather than solely through curricular messages. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that engagement with religious and cultural diversity becomes more meaningful when learners encounter and interpret difference within actual social contexts (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Jackson, 2008; Von der Lippe, 2011). Students' accounts of becoming less nervous or more comfortable should not be interpreted as evidence of profound attitudinal transformation. Rather, they indicate that extracurricular settings expanded opportunities for intercultural interaction and contributed to making encounters with cultural difference more familiar within school life.

As intercultural encounters became part of different areas of school life, however, they were not received in the same way by all members of the Ummushabri community. Objections from some teachers and questions from parents concerning non-Muslim visitors and educators reveal that institutional openness could also generate concerns about religious boundaries. Such resistance is analytically important because it shows that tolerance at Ummushabri was negotiated rather than simply prescribed. Previous studies demonstrate considerable variation in how Indonesian *pesantren* engage pluralism, multicultural education, and wider society (Pohl, 2006; Maksum, 2015; Latif, 2021; Sumadi, 2021). The present findings add an internal dimension to this literature by showing that different responses to religious diversity

can coexist within the same institution. Tolerance should therefore not be treated as a fixed institutional attribute, but as an ongoing social process shaped by institutional direction, interpersonal experience, and contestation among members of the educational community.

The interaction between institutional arrangements and everyday relationships constitutes the study's principal conceptual contribution. Existing research has established the importance of curriculum, leadership, school culture, and institutional orientation in cultivating tolerance within Indonesian education and *pesantren* (Raihani, 2014; Maksum, 2015; Mursyid, 2016; Latif, 2021; Sumadi, 2021). The Ummushabri case shows how these institutional dimensions become socially consequential through the encounters they enable. Leadership created access to foreign educators and intercultural activities, curriculum provided normative language concerning tolerance, and school programs created opportunities for direct engagement with difference. These dimensions operated in combination rather than independently. The findings therefore conceptualize tolerance as an institutional-relational process in which organizational arrangement's structure opportunities for encounter, while everyday relationships give institutional commitments to tolerance a concrete social form.

Understanding tolerance as an institutional-relational process also requires attention to the conditions under which intercultural contact occurred. At Ummushabri, contact was sustained, but participants did not interact from equivalent institutional positions: teachers and students occupied different roles, while foreign educators participated within norms established by the host *pesantren*. This is important because intergroup contact does not operate independently of the social and institutional settings in which encounters take place (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Rather than simply confirming the contact hypothesis, the findings show that institutional context shaped how contact was organized and experienced. The rules governing interaction, the accommodation expected from participants, and the religious boundaries maintained by the school therefore formed part of the process through which tolerance was practiced.

The findings also connect tolerance with broader questions of participation in culturally diverse societies, although the study did not directly measure citizenship outcomes. Banks (2008) argues that education must negotiate relationships between group identities and participation beyond immediate cultural communities, while Raihani (2018) demonstrates the importance of multicultural citizenship within Indonesian education.

Ummushabri provides a situated illustration of this tension: students encountered foreign teachers and international peers while remaining within an explicitly Islamic educational environment. Such encounters cannot be taken as evidence that students became “global citizens.” Rather, they show that engagement across cultural and religious boundaries can occur without requiring learners to detach themselves from their existing religious and institutional identities, an important distinction in discussions of education within increasingly diverse societies (Banks, 2008; Oxley & Morris, 2013).

For educational practice, the findings suggest that teaching tolerance and providing opportunities to encounter difference are complementary rather than interchangeable strategies. Curriculum can articulate values of respect and coexistence, while direct encounters introduce forms of interaction, uncertainty, and negotiation that normative instruction alone cannot provide. Conversely, exposure to difference cannot be assumed to produce tolerant responses without supportive institutional conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Kisbiyanto, 2025). Ummushabri combined curricular messages, foreign educators, extracurricular activities, and leadership responses to concerns arising from religious difference. Tolerance education therefore requires coherence between what institutions teach, the encounters they facilitate, and the norms through which those encounters are managed. This is particularly relevant to religious education, where engagement with diversity occurs alongside continuing commitments to particular religious traditions and institutional identities (Schweitzer, 2007; Jackson, 2008; Quddus et al., 2024).

The experience at Ummushabri also draws attention to a challenge that extends beyond Indonesian *pesantren*: encounters with religious difference in education do not occur in institutionally neutral spaces. At Ummushabri, non-Muslim educators participated in everyday school life, yet their participation remained shaped by the religious norms of the host institution and was initially questioned by some teachers and parents. This combination of openness, boundary maintenance, and contestation reflects a broader challenge for faith-based education in contexts of religious plurality (Ashufah et al., 2025). Religious education must engage diversity while remaining attentive to the identities and institutional contexts within which encounters occur (Schweitzer, 2007; Jackson, 2008; Von der Lippe, 2011; Taufiq & Said, 2025). The Ummushabri case contributes to this debate by showing that engagement across religious difference can develop within a clearly defined religious environment, but that its possibilities and boundaries remain institutionally negotiated.

Beyond the Indonesian context, these findings offer broader implications for faith-based educational institutions navigating religious diversity through internationalization and intercultural exchange (Banks, 2008; Raihani, 2018). The Ummushabri case highlights how meaningful interreligious engagement can emerge within institutions that maintain explicit religious identities, provided that opportunities for interaction are supported by institutional arrangements and negotiated expectations (Latif, 2021; Ma'arif et al., 2025). This insight contributes to international discussions on intergroup contact and religious education by illustrating how institutional authority, cultural accommodation, and everyday relationships jointly shape encounters across religious boundaries (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011). For faith-based schools in other multicultural settings, the findings suggest the importance of integrating intercultural programs with transparent institutional norms, supportive leadership, and mechanisms for addressing concerns among teachers, students, and parents (Jackson, 2008; Suyanta et al., 2024). Rather than proposing a universally transferable model, the study identifies institutional and relational conditions that may inform comparative research and educational practices across different religious and national contexts.

Despite its contribution to understanding tolerance through intercultural encounters in faith-based education, this study has several limitations. As a single qualitative case, its findings are context-specific and cannot represent *pesantren* with different theological orientations, geographical settings, institutional resources, or levels of international exposure. Evidence concerning earlier international programs also relies partly on retrospective accounts and documentary records rather than contemporaneous observation. Moreover, the 2024 fieldwork captured participants' experiences and observable interactions within a defined period but did not employ longitudinal measures of students' attitudes, prejudice, civic dispositions, or behavior. The study can therefore explain how tolerance was practiced and negotiated within this particular institutional setting, but it cannot establish enduring attitudinal change, causal effects of intercultural contact, or uniform outcomes across Indonesian *pesantren*.

D. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the cultivation of tolerance at Ummushabri Islamic Boarding School emerged through everyday interactions, classroom practices, extracurricular engagement, and leadership initiatives that encouraged openness to

diversity. Tolerance operated not as a discrete lesson but as a lived educational practice shaped by encounters with cultural and religious differences. The findings indicate that curricular messages and institutional commitments acquired practical meaning when students encountered difference through everyday educational relationships. Importantly, these encounters did not require the religious identity of the *pesantren* to be suspended. Instead, tolerance was practiced within an explicitly Islamic institutional environment in which interaction with difference remained shaped by established religious norms and boundaries.

The study contributes to discussions of tolerance in Islamic and faith-based education by conceptualizing tolerance as an institutional-relational process. Rather than locating tolerance primarily in curriculum, leadership, or institutional values, the findings show how these dimensions interact with everyday encounters to give tolerance a concrete social form. Institutionally supported opportunities for interaction allowed students to experience cultural and religious difference within ordinary educational life, while the responses of teachers and parents also demonstrated that such encounters could involve negotiation and contestation. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of connecting tolerance-related curriculum with institutional support and meaningful opportunities for interaction, rather than assuming that either normative instruction or exposure to diversity is sufficient on its own.

Based on the limitations identified in the Discussion, future research should examine these processes across *pesantren* with different theological orientations, geographical settings, institutional resources, and levels of international exposure. Comparative studies could determine which aspects of the institutional-relational process are specific to Ummushabri and which recur across different educational settings. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether repeated intercultural encounters are associated with sustained changes in students' attitudes and behavior. Studies of intercultural programs would further benefit from contemporaneous and longitudinal evidence, enabling changes in participants' experiences to be traced systematically rather than relying primarily on retrospective accounts.

Ultimately, the Ummushabri case shows that tolerance in faith-based education is not simply a value to be taught or an outcome of exposure to difference. It is a practice that takes shape through the relationship between institutional conditions and everyday encounters, while remaining negotiated within the religious boundaries of the educational community.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or publication of this article.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with language refinement, academic expression, and improvements in the clarity and organization of the text. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, fabricate or modify empirical evidence, conduct the primary data analysis, or determine the study's findings and conclusions. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

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