

Fostering Students' Tolerance Character Through Structured Intercultural Dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe efforts to foster students' tolerance character through structured intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara. The research background is based on the diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of students, which necessitates mutual respect and appreciation among peers. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study involved teachers and students directly engaged in intercultural dialogue activities. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed via data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Findings indicate that structured intercultural dialogue plays a significant role in nurturing students' tolerance. Students are trained to respect differences, avoid discriminatory behavior, and develop understanding of diverse cultural and religious perspectives. Key supporting factors include a conducive school environment, active teacher involvement, and student and peer participation. Nonetheless, challenges remain, such as existing stereotypes, teasing, and exclusive behaviors among some students. Overall, this study confirms that structured intercultural dialogue can serve as an effective strategy to cultivate students' tolerance character in multicultural school settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental pillar in developing human potential, encompassing not only cognitive skills but also moral, social, and spiritual identity formation. In today's global context, characterized by technological dynamics, information flows, and intensive cross-cultural interactions, education is no longer merely about knowledge transmission; it also functions as a strategic instrument to instill values and shape character capable of navigating the challenges of globalization. In Indonesia, this need is particularly pressing due to the country's diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious composition. The Pancasila ideology underscores the importance of education that develops not only academically competent individuals but also those who are morally upright, tolerant, and with integrity (Pia Amelia et al., 2025; Prawiro, 2020).

Theoretically, character education is a conscious effort to internalize ethical values within students while systematically instilling moral principles through direct and contextual educational practices (Prawiro, 2020). It integrates knowledge, awareness, and behavior relating to the self, others, the environment, and the nation. Its implementation is inseparable from habitual reinforcement of positive values in school life, synergy among family, school, and community, and consistent value internalization in all aspects of learning (Hazizah Isnaini, 2023; Rofi'ie, 2019; Triana, 2022). The primary goal of character education is to cultivate a generation that is moral, resilient, tolerant, and responsible (Althafullayya et al., 2024; Rasyid et al., 2024). In the context of globalization and external cultural influences, character education based on local culture becomes vital for fostering resilience, adaptability, and tolerance (Laksono & Manik, 2023; Laku et al., 2022; Ardina Kamal, 2023).

Among character values, tolerance is particularly relevant to Indonesia's social reality. Etymologically, "tolerance" derives from the Latin *tolerare*, meaning "to endure." Conceptually, it refers to the attitude of

appreciating and accepting differences, including in religion, culture, and life perspectives (Suyanta, 2013; Ihwanul et al., 2025; Afdal et al., 2024; Ardina Kamal, 2023). In education, tolerance encompasses appreciation of diversity, empathy, effective communication, openness, self-regulation, and social care (Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023; Wahab & Luthfan, 2023; Sodik, 2020; Laku et al., 2022). Therefore, fostering tolerance not only cultivates harmonious social relations in schools but also prepares youth to thrive in a pluralistic and dynamic society.

Implementing tolerance education in schools involves various strategies, including teacher role modeling, curriculum integration, and learning activities that promote cross-cultural interaction. Widiastuti & Ariani (2023) and Usmi (2024) highlight that tolerance can be nurtured through inclusive programs and intercultural dialogue, allowing students to experience diversity directly in daily interactions. Thus, tolerance education is not merely theoretical but a practical effort to establish a culture of peace within schools.

Intercultural dialogue is a particularly strategic mechanism to develop tolerance. It refers to communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, aiming to foster understanding, solidarity, and reduce prejudice (Muhtarom et al., 2024; Sobon & Astari, 2024; Ardina Kamal, 2023). Effective dialogue is characterized by cross-cultural understanding, empathy, openness, and self-awareness (Efendi et al., 2024; Gainau, 2012; Ardina Kamal, 2023). In educational settings, structured intercultural dialogue strengthens inclusive leadership, raises social awareness, and fosters tolerant student character (Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022; Ardina Kamal, 2023). In other words, dialogue functions not only as a communication method but also as a pedagogical tool that promotes an inclusive school culture.

Successful implementation requires systematic approaches. Rudiawan (2021), Tuala et al. (2024), and Laku et al. (2022) emphasize that effective strategies include integrating multicultural curricula, engaging the community, active teacher participation, value-based conflict resolution, and leveraging local wisdom as an educational medium. Structured intercultural dialogue thus serves both as a learning tool to promote inclusivity and as a means to reinforce students' national identity.

Previous studies have highlighted the effectiveness of tolerance education through various approaches. Ependi (2019) found that habituating tolerance at SMAN 2 Ponorogo successfully shaped polite and respectful behaviors. Sofiana (2023) observed that active student engagement in class discussions at MIN 2 Mataram significantly contributed to multicultural awareness and social harmony. Mustamiah (2020) reported that religious education practices in multicultural schools, including inclusion of students with disabilities, naturally fostered religious tolerance. These findings confirm that tolerance can be nurtured through habituation, active engagement, and inclusive activities.

However, most prior research has focused on general habituation practices or inclusive activities, while studies on the effectiveness of structured intercultural dialogue remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining in depth the efforts to cultivate students' tolerance character through intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram, based on the assumption that tolerance cannot be taught normatively alone but must be experienced through systematic and reflective cross-cultural interactions.

Hence, this research aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to character education in Indonesia. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on the relationship between intercultural dialogue and the development of students' tolerance. Practically, the findings are expected to guide schools and educational policymakers in designing dialogue-based, inclusive, and multicultural learning models. Ultimately, character education that emphasizes tolerance and intercultural dialogue strengthens commitment to peaceful coexistence and social cohesion (Rudiawan, 2021; Laku et al., 2022).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study strategy to explore in depth the efforts to foster students' tolerance character through structured intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine phenomena in naturalistic settings, emphasizing subjective meanings and experiences, and to investigate the socio-cultural context surrounding educational practices (Sugiyono, 2022; Triana, 2022). The use of a case study was deemed appropriate as the research focuses on a single educational institution that represents cultural diversity, enabling a comprehensive exploration of intercultural dialogue implementation in shaping students' tolerance (Sugiyono, 2022; Laku et al., 2022).

The research site was selected as SMAN 9 Mataram, a secondary school characterized by heterogeneity in students' culture, religion, and social backgrounds. This school was strategically chosen for three reasons: first, it has programs explicitly supporting cross-cultural interactions; second, its diverse student body provides authentic conditions to examine intercultural dialogue dynamics; third, it is considered representative for studying multicultural character education in Indonesia (Rudiawan, 2021). The research subjects included students, teachers, and school management personnel directly involved in the planning and implementation of intercultural dialogue activities.

Data were collected using three main techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted to record intercultural dialogue practices and student social interactions in both formal and non-formal activities. In-depth interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators provided rich insights into experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered during dialogue implementation. Additionally, documentation, including activity notes, photographs, school policy archives, and supporting materials, was used as supplementary data to strengthen the validity of findings.

Data analysis followed an interactive model comprising three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and verification or conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2022; Triana, 2022). This cyclical process allowed researchers to continuously review, interpret, and validate findings throughout the study. To enhance data credibility, source and method triangulation were applied by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation (Laku et al., 2022). Furthermore, member checking was conducted by asking participants to confirm preliminary findings to ensure interpretations aligned with their lived realities.

With this methodological design, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive, coherent, and valid portrayal of how structured intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram contributes to fostering students' tolerance character. Beyond contextual description, the findings are positioned to offer conceptual contributions to the development of multicultural character education theory in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fostering Students' Tolerance Character Through Intercultural Dialogue

The study at SMAN 9 Mataram revealed that intercultural dialogue practices are integrated into various aspects of school activities, including formal classroom learning and non-formal activities such as extracurricular programs, group discussions, seminars, and culture-based initiatives. These efforts demonstrate the institution's awareness of its role not only as a knowledge-transfer center but also as a space for cultivating tolerance and diversity character (Rudiawan, 2021; Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022).

Interviews with the Geography teacher indicated that tolerance is implemented through respect for religious holidays. The school provides accommodations for students to participate in religious activities, including spiritual camps for Hindu and Muslim students. Similarly, a local content teacher explained that classroom instruction is designed to encourage cross-cultural interactions. Teachers deliberately form heterogeneous study groups so that students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds can get to know each other, build friendships, and develop mutual respect. This strategy reflects a multicultural approach that positions interaction as a vehicle for internalizing tolerance values in learning processes (Laku et al., 2022; Triana, 2022).

Another finding highlighted the "Cultural Saturday" program, which serves as a forum for preserving and celebrating regional cultures. An Economics teacher stated that this program provides opportunities for students to present the cultural heritage of their respective regions, such as traditional attire from Aceh, Bali, or Medan. Through such activities, students not only learn about cultural diversity but also cultivate pride in a pluralistic national identity (Yusuf et al., 2024; Laksono & Manik, 2023).

Cross-cultural engagement is also evident in various dialogue forums and diversity seminars. An Indonesian language teacher explained that seminars and dialogues on specific cultural topics are conducted collaboratively, both in class and through cultural extracurricular activities. In these forums, students have the opportunity to explain their regional traditions—for instance, students from Lombok introduced the *nyongkolan* tradition to peers from other cultural backgrounds. The Religious Education teacher reinforced

that Cultural Saturday functions as a strategic platform to teach mutual tolerance, understand each other's traditions, and prevent cultural misunderstandings (Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023; Ihwanul et al., 2025).

From the students' perspective, the benefits of intercultural dialogue are tangible. They reported that participation in diversity seminars and religious holiday celebrations broadened their cross-cultural understanding. Other students noted that Cultural Saturday serves as a space to understand peers' cultural practices. Researcher observations confirmed these statements: during cultural presentations, students not only showcased their identities but also engaged in open dialogue, enriching collective knowledge while fostering mutual respect (Ependi, 2019; Sofiana, 2023).

The benefits of cross-cultural dialogue were further highlighted in student testimonies emphasizing its role in preventing misunderstandings in daily interactions. Through the exchange of opinions and experiences, students gained deeper insights into each other's cultures. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that SMAN 9 Mataram has successfully implemented a consistent strategy to cultivate tolerance through both formal and non-formal interactions, resulting in students who are more open, inclusive, and adaptive in the face of diversity (Rasyid et al., 2024; Ardina Kamal, 2023).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Structured Intercultural Dialogue

The implementation of intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram is supported by several factors stemming from both the school environment and individual roles. Teachers emphasized the importance of active teacher participation and school facilitation as key factors. Effective communication, a comfortable learning climate, and collaboration among school members (teachers, staff, and students) play a significant role in creating an inclusive atmosphere. Leadership support through the provision of spaces and facilities also determines program success. Active teacher involvement, a conducive environment, peer support, and openness within the school collectively act as primary drivers for implementing intercultural dialogue (Efendi et al., 2024; Ihwanul et al., 2025; Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023).

In addition to supportive factors, the study identified several barriers in implementing intercultural dialogue. Some students still consider their own culture or religion superior to others, some feel embarrassed to present their regional culture, and discriminatory attitudes persist in daily interactions. Students tend to differentiate among peers, show reluctance to be open, and exhibit teasing behavior based on skin color, hair type, or language accent. Comparing cultures becomes a form of exclusivity that hinders interaction (Rudiawan, 2021; Laku et al., 2022; Sodik, 2020).

Field observations reinforced these findings, showing incidents of students teasing each other regarding religion and skin color. Although often framed humorously, such behaviors trigger emotional tension and reflect the persistence of negative stereotypes among students. Therefore, the primary barriers to intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram include exclusive attitudes, lack of openness among students, and discriminatory behaviors based on ethnicity or religion (Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022; Usmi, 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that SMAN 9 Mataram has successfully implemented various effective strategies for fostering student tolerance through intercultural dialogue. This success is supported by teacher involvement, school facilities, and student participation in both formal and non-formal programs. Nonetheless, challenges related to exclusivity and discriminatory behavior still require attention to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of dialogue initiatives.

Fostering Students' Tolerance Character Through Intercultural Dialogue

The findings at SMAN 9 Mataram demonstrate that intercultural dialogue has been optimally utilized to cultivate students' tolerance character. This aligns with Muhtarom et al. (2024), who emphasize that intercultural communication constitutes an exchange of messages between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, where communication extends beyond verbal interaction to social relationships imbued with social, cultural, and institutional values. In other words, the success of intercultural communication depends heavily on cultural sensitivity and mutual respect (Efendi et al., 2024; Ihwanul et al., 2025).

In practice, SMAN 9 Mataram implements intercultural dialogue through two main channels: formal classroom learning and non-formal activities outside the classroom. In the formal learning domain, teachers form heterogeneous study groups based on religion, ethnicity, and culture. This strategy provides students with opportunities to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds, helping them become accustomed to experiencing differences directly. This approach supports the concept of multicultural education, which emphasizes experiential learning as a medium for internalizing tolerance values (Rudiawan, 2021; Laku et al., 2022).

Classroom intercultural dialogue also has long-term impacts on developing openness. Students become more adaptive, less prone to prejudice, and capable of establishing healthy communication with peers from different backgrounds (Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022; Sofiana, 2023).

Beyond formal learning, non-formal activities serve as strategic spaces to reinforce tolerance. The “Cultural Saturday” program offers students opportunities to showcase cultural heritage from various regions of Indonesia. This activity goes beyond performance; it is an interactive dialogue where students discuss the meaning of traditional clothing, local cuisine, and embedded cultural values. Consequently, the program serves a dual function: cultural preservation and character education in tolerance (Rasyid et al., 2024; Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023).

Additionally, diversity seminars and religious holiday celebrations expand students’ understanding of social pluralism. Students not only comprehend differences cognitively but also experience them directly through interaction, discussion, and collective reflection. This process aligns with findings that intercultural conflict often arises from miscommunication or lack of understanding (Efendi et al., 2024; Tuala et al., 2024). Therefore, school-based intercultural dialogue functions as an effective preventive mechanism to mitigate potential conflicts while strengthening social cohesion.

In sum, the strategies applied at SMAN 9 Mataram demonstrate that multicultural education based on direct experience, local wisdom, and culture-based activities plays a crucial role in developing students who are tolerant, inclusive, and character-driven (Rudiawan, 2021; Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022; Laku et al., 2022).

Supporting Factors for Intercultural Dialogue Implementation

This study identified several structural and personal factors that underpin the success of intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram. The first factor is the active and supportive role of teachers. Teachers function not only as educators but also as facilitators and mediators in cross-cultural interactions. They form heterogeneous study groups, facilitate cultural presentations, and guide students in extracurricular activities based on arts and traditions. This aligns with the perspective that teachers are key agents in multicultural education, capable of steering interactions toward inclusive and tolerant patterns (Rudiawan, 2021; Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022).

The second factor is a conducive school environment. A supportive learning environment fosters positive interactions among students, teachers, and other school stakeholders (Laku et al., 2022; Ihwanul et al., 2025). At SMAN 9 Mataram, this is evident through school policies that encourage cross-cultural collaboration, provide space for religious holiday celebrations, and offer open discussion forums. Responsive school leadership further strengthens an inclusive climate.

The third factor is active participation of students and peers. Daily interactions among students from diverse backgrounds create informal dialogue spaces that are essential for social learning. Students learn to appreciate differences through shared experiences, discussions, and collaborative projects. Peers act as social agents reinforcing messages of tolerance through emotional closeness (Laksono & Manik, 2023; Sofiana, 2023).

The fourth factor is the support of multicultural school programs. Extracurricular programs in arts and culture, diversity seminars, and student forums are designed to encourage cross-cultural interaction. These programs demonstrate that character education can be internalized not only through formal curriculum but also through direct experiences in collaborative activities (Rasyid et al., 2024; Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023).

Together, these four supporting factors synergize to create a sustainable multicultural education ecosystem at SMAN 9 Mataram.

Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue

Despite its overall success, the implementation of intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram faces several barriers. The first barrier is exclusivity among students. Some students tend to socialize within homogeneous groups, limiting cross-cultural interactions (Sodik, 2020; Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023).

The second barrier is students' lack of openness. Some students feel hesitant to express their cultural identity for fear of rejection or ridicule. This condition indicates a sense of psychological insecurity, which hampers the dialogue process (Gainau, 2012; Laksono & Manik, 2023).

The third barrier is the emergence of discriminatory behavior. Observations revealed that teasing based on language accents, skin color, or peer habits still occurs. Although often perceived as joking, such behavior creates social distance and inhibits intercultural interaction. Negative stereotypes remain a challenge in building an inclusive school culture (Sodik, 2020; Sofiana, 2023).

These barriers indicate that fostering tolerance character cannot be achieved solely through formal dialogue forums; it requires further interventions to change students' mindsets and attitudes. Teachers and school authorities need to continuously internalize multicultural values to minimize these obstacles (Rudiawan, 2021; Ihwanul et al., 2025).

Implications of the Findings

Conceptually, this study enriches the discourse on multicultural education in Indonesia. SMAN 9 Mataram demonstrates that structured intercultural dialogue can effectively foster students' tolerance. This approach aligns with the 21st-century education agenda, which emphasizes social competence, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills in a multicultural context (Rudiawan, 2021; Widyatmaka & Hidayat, 2022).

Practically, the findings suggest that other schools can adopt the model implemented at SMAN 9 Mataram, particularly in integrating formal and non-formal activities based on local culture. National education policies may also adopt similar strategies by strengthening multicultural curricula, providing specialized intercultural dialogue modules, and enhancing teachers' capacity to manage classroom diversity (Ihwanul et al., 2025; Laksono & Manik, 2023).

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the success of fostering students' tolerance character at SMAN 9 Mataram is due to the integration of formal and non-formal strategies, active teacher involvement, a conducive school environment, student participation, and supportive school programs (Rasyid et al., 2024; Widiastuti & Ariani, 2023). Nevertheless, exclusive attitudes, lack of student openness, and discriminatory behaviors remain challenges that need to be addressed. Therefore, intercultural dialogue should be continually reinforced as a pedagogical approach that equips students not only with academic competencies but also with inclusive and tolerant character to navigate Indonesia's diverse society (Sodik, 2020; Sofiana, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that systematically implemented intercultural dialogue at SMAN 9 Mataram has significantly contributed to the development of students' tolerance character. The integration of formal strategies—such as heterogeneous study groups and multicultural classroom learning—with non-formal strategies—such as the Cultural Saturday program, diversity seminars, and religious holiday celebrations—has created a learning environment focused not only on knowledge transfer but also on the internalization of multicultural values. As a result, students exhibited increased openness, respect for differences, and the ability to build inclusive social relationships.

The success of these strategies is supported by active teacher facilitation, a conducive school environment, student participation in cross-cultural activities, and consistent support from school programs

promoting multicultural values. These four factors synergistically enable intercultural dialogue to function as an effective medium for developing students' social skills, empathy, and critical awareness. The findings reinforce the argument that multicultural education based on direct experience and local wisdom can serve as a critical instrument in building a tolerant national character.

However, the study also identified persistent barriers. Exclusive attitudes, students' reluctance to express cultural identity, and discriminatory behaviors based on ethnicity and religion remain present in the school environment. This phenomenon indicates that strengthening intercultural dialogue requires ongoing intervention, including the creation of safe spaces, capacity building for teachers in diversity management, and more stringent school policies to address discrimination.

Conceptually, these findings enrich the discourse on multicultural education in Indonesia by demonstrating that intercultural dialogue is not merely an extracurricular activity but a strategic pedagogical approach aligned with the global 21st-century education agenda. Practically, the model implemented at SMAN 9 Mataram can be adapted by other schools to strengthen social cohesion within pluralistic societies. Therefore, intercultural dialogue can be positioned as a crucial pillar in character education, preparing students not only to navigate local diversity but also to acquire global competencies relevant in a multicultural era.

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