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From Asymmetric Coexistence to Inclusive-Relational PAI: Constructing the Meaning of Tolerance in Multicultural Schools

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how Muslim and non-Muslim students construct the meaning of tolerance within the learning ecosystem of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) in a multicultural school. Employing a qualitative narrative-thematic design, the study was conducted at SMAN 1 Banjaran, Bandung Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving Muslim students, non-Muslim students, PAI teachers, and guidance and counseling teachers. The findings indicate that tolerance cannot be understood merely as the absence of conflict. Rather, it is a relational experience shaped by language, religious humor, symbols, group work, and majority-minority relations. Interreligious relations among students tend to reflect asymmetric coexistence: students are able to befriend and cooperate with one another, yet their experiences of safety and recognition are not fully equal. This study proposes the concept of Inclusive-Relational PAI, an approach to PAI learning that remains rooted in Islamic teachings while being attentive to language, safe spaces, dialogue, and the experiences of students from different religious backgrounds. The findings highlight the important role of PAI teachers as curators of religious language and facilitators of fair interreligious interaction grounded in inclusive civility.
Keywords: Islamic Religious Education; tolerance; multicultural school; asymmetric coexistence; Inclusive-Relational PAI.

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Introduction

Religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity is a fundamental feature of Indonesian society and a strategic challenge for education. Schools are not merely sites for the transmission of knowledge; they are also social spaces in which students learn to live together, understand differences, and build relationships across identities. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that education should foster peace, human rights, global citizenship, respect for diversity, and the prevention of discrimination. In Indonesia, this orientation is reflected in the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*, particularly in the dimension of global diversity, which highlights students' ability to recognize, respect, and engage reflectively with cultural and religious diversity (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan, 2022). Tolerance, therefore, should not be understood merely as a normative moral value, but as a social competence shaped through learning experiences, everyday interactions, and an inclusive school culture.

The 2024 Religious Harmony Index reached 76.47 and was categorized as high, increasing from 76.02 in 2023 (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2024). However, SETARA Institute (2025) recorded 260 incidents and 402 acts of violation of freedom of religion or belief throughout 2024, an increase from 217 incidents and 329 acts in 2023. These data suggest that macro-level religious harmony does not automatically eliminate socio-religious tensions at the micro level. In schools, a situation may appear administratively harmonious while still containing discomfort, symbolic distance, or unequal relations for minority groups.

Multicultural education positions schools as spaces for cultivating mutual respect, reducing prejudice, and building just relationships (Banks, 2010). Intergroup contact theory explains that cross-group interaction can reduce prejudice when supported by equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, contact does not automatically produce tolerance. Its effectiveness depends on the quality of relationships, social norms, emotions, and inequalities embedded in

majority-minority relations (Tropp et al., 2022). Thus, the mere presence of students from different religious backgrounds in the same school is insufficient to demonstrate substantive tolerance.

In Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI), tolerance becomes more complex because PAI is situated at the intersection of religious identity formation and the social ethics of a plural society. Q.S. al-Hujurāt [49]: 13 affirms that human beings were created into nations and tribes so that they may know one another. The principle of *li ta'ārafū* contains a theological mandate for dialogue, recognition, and humanitarian cooperation (Shihab, 2007). In contemporary Islamic education, PAI needs to be developed in an inclusive, dialogical manner and oriented toward *rahmatan lil 'ālamīn*, rather than focusing solely on the cognitive mastery of religious knowledge. This orientation is also consistent with religious moderation, which emphasizes tolerance, national commitment, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019; Hasanudin, 2019; Mu'ti, 2023; Shihab, 2007).

Multicultural PAI can cultivate mutual respect through learning materials, teacher strategies, classroom interaction, and a school culture that respects difference (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024). Rahmat and Yahya (2022) show that inclusive PAI teaching materials can enhance students' tolerance. International studies have also emphasized the importance of religious literacy and dialogical pedagogy in helping students understand religion and religious identity reflectively (Jackson, 2014). Meanwhile, Utami (2022) shows that equality in religious education in multireligious Indonesian public schools continues to face challenges related to minority students, teacher availability, institutional support, and the bargaining position of minority groups.

Existing studies on PAI and tolerance have tended to focus on teachers, instructional design, teaching materials, or normative foundations. Students' subjective experiences in interreligious interaction remain less widely explored. Tolerance is also often treated as an attitude to be taught or measured, rather than as a meaning negotiated through everyday social experience. Micro-level dimensions of PAI learning such as religious language, religion-based jokes, identity

labeling, the awkwardness experienced by minority students, and the choice to remain silent when feeling uncomfortable, are still rarely examined. Yet the concept of school belonging emphasizes that students' sense of belonging is shaped by experiences of recognition, safety, and dignified participation (Kuttner, 2023).

In multicultural schools with majority-minority compositions, tolerance cannot be understood simply as the absence of conflict. Muslim and non-Muslim students may study, work in groups, and build friendships within the same school space, yet their social experiences are not necessarily symmetrical. For majority students, religious symbols, language, and routines may feel natural because they align with the dominant identity. For minority students, however, the same space may require adaptation, caution, or silence, particularly when religious humor touches upon their identity. Lamont and Molnár (2002) explain that symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them" operate subtly through social categories, language, communication, and institutional normality. Interreligious relations in schools may therefore take the form of asymmetric coexistence: living side by side, but not necessarily as equals.

This study draws on symbolic interactionism, intergroup contact theory, and recognition theory. Symbolic interactionism views meaning as formed through interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). In the context of PAI, teachers' utterances, religious terms, jokes, group work, gestures of respect, and responses to students of different religions become symbols that students interpret in different ways. Contact theory explains that interreligious cooperation can foster tolerance when supported by equality, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp et al., 2022). Recognition theory further affirms that just relations require recognition of the dignity and experiences of others; without recognition, difference may be formally tolerated while remaining socially marginalized (Taylor, 1994). Based on these perspectives, this study analyzes how Muslim and non-Muslim students construct the meaning of tolerance, particularly through their experiential narratives, the symbolic boundaries of language and religious expression, and the possibility of moving toward Inclusive-Relational PAI.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a narrative-thematic design to examine how Muslim and non-Muslim students construct the meaning of tolerance within the learning ecosystem of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) in a multicultural school. A qualitative approach was selected because the study was not intended to measure tolerance statistically, but to interpret students' experiences, meanings, and social relations in everyday school life (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative design was used because the study focused on students' stories, subjective experiences, memories, and reflections when interacting with peers from different religious backgrounds and interpreting religious language and symbols within the PAI context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The analysis was conducted narratively and thematically, as students' experiences were interpreted as stories while also being organized into major themes.

The study was conducted at SMAN 1 Banjaran, Bandung Regency, West Java. This school was purposively selected because it represents a public school in which Muslim students constitute the majority and non-Muslim students constitute the minority. In this study, PAI is understood not only as a formal subject for Muslim students, but also as a pedagogical-religious ecosystem that shapes school culture, religious language, peer interaction, and the social experiences of students from different religious backgrounds.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in, and the depth of their experiences related to, the focus of the study (Patton, 2015). The primary informants consisted of Muslim and non-Muslim students, while supporting informants included PAI teachers and guidance and counseling teachers. The selection criteria included experience within the PAI ecosystem, previous interaction with peers from different religious backgrounds, willingness to share reflective narratives, and consent to participate in the study. The number of informants was determined by the adequacy and depth of the data rather than by statistical representation.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews,

observation, and documentation. The interviews explored students' narratives about tolerance, interreligious friendship, group work, religious language, comfort, jokes, symbols, and religious boundaries. Observations focused on patterns of interaction in classrooms and the wider school environment, while documentation included the school profile, PAI learning materials, and other relevant documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and researcher reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were addressed through the confidentiality of participants' identities, informed consent, the use of pseudonyms, and the use of data solely for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

Asymmetric Coexistence in the PAI Ecosystem

The findings show that Muslim and non-Muslim students' construction of tolerance in Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) learning does not occur in a socially neutral space. Administratively, SMAN 1 Banjaran is a public school that is open to students from different religious backgrounds. Demographically and symbolically, however, it is dominated by Muslim students. School data show that of 1,552 students across 41 study groups, approximately 75 are Protestant and Catholic Christian students, while the rest are Muslim. This composition is not merely statistical; it is a social condition that shapes how students experience school space, interpret difference, and give meaning to tolerance in everyday life. Relations between Muslim and non-Muslim students within the PAI ecosystem are therefore more accurately understood as asymmetric coexistence: a form of shared presence that appears harmonious but does not always produce equal social experiences for all students (Allport, 1954; Banks, 2010; Utami, 2022).

Asymmetric coexistence refers to a condition in which students

from different religious backgrounds live side by side, interact, cooperate, and experience relatively little open conflict, yet their social positions, sense of safety, belonging, and freedom to express discomfort are not experienced equally. For Muslim students, the PAI ecosystem tends to feel natural because the language, symbols, religious habituation, and rhythm of school activities align with their religious identity. For non-Muslim students, however, the same environment may require adaptation because they are situated within a school atmosphere shaped largely by Islamic expressions. In this sense, non-Muslim students are not merely "religiously different" in an administrative sense; they experience school from a social position that is not fully symmetrical with that of Muslim students as the majority group (Graham et al., 2022; Kuttner, 2023).

This asymmetry is evident in the way PAI functions not only as a subject, but also as a pedagogical-religious ecosystem that extends beyond the classroom. In the research data, PAI is connected to religious learning, Qur'an recitation habituation, Dhuha prayer, Friday activities, religious terminology, and norms that shape school culture. For Muslim students, these practices support religious character formation and moral habituation. For non-Muslim students, however, the same practices may create adaptive situations. They are not always direct participants in Islamic religious activities, but they remain within a social environment influenced by those activities. Thus, non-Muslim students cannot be understood as entirely outside the PAI ecosystem; their everyday experiences remain in contact with the language, interactions, symbols, and culture produced by that ecosystem (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Utami, 2022).

This study does not claim that non-Muslim students become doctrinal participants in PAI learning in the same way as Muslim students. Rather, they experience the social effects of the PAI ecosystem through interaction with Muslim peers, religious habituation, classroom atmosphere, group work, and everyday religious language. One narrative from a non-Muslim student indicates that when PAI learning takes place, the student tends to listen more, follow the classroom atmosphere, and, in certain situations, feel different and therefore need to adjust. This

narrative shows that minority position often appears as negotiated presence within a majority-minority structure (Dupper et al., 2015; Forrest-Bank & Dupper, 2016; Utami, 2022).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this experience shows that the meaning of tolerance is not formed solely through definitions provided by teachers, but through the symbols students encounter in social interaction. Teachers' utterances, religious terms, religious habituation, peer grouping, classroom atmosphere, and responses to students of different religions become social signs that students interpret in different ways. When non-Muslim students choose to listen more during PAI learning, or feel the need to adjust themselves during school religious activities, such actions are not merely passive responses. They are interpretive responses to the symbolic environment they experience. This is consistent with the view that human beings act on the basis of meaning, while meaning itself is formed through social interaction and modified through interpretive processes (Blumer, 1969; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Mead, 1934).

Asymmetric coexistence is also visible in the different ways Muslim and non-Muslim students make sense of school space. For Muslim students, PAI becomes a space for strengthening religious identity because the materials, examples, language, and habituation present in school are directly related to their own religious experience. For non-Muslim students, however, the same space requires adaptation. They may feel accepted as friends, yet at the same time realize that the dominant language and symbols do not come from their own religious tradition. Coexistence in school must therefore be read through students' subjective experiences in everyday relations (Graham et al., 2022; Kuttner, 2023; Taylor, 1994).

These findings extend Utami's (2022) argument regarding the challenges of equality in religious education in multireligious Indonesian public schools. This study adds a micro-level dimension: inequality occurs not only in the provision of formal services, but also at symbolic and relational levels. Minority students may not experience direct administrative discrimination, yet they still occupy different positions in interaction, language use, and belonging. Asymmetric coexistence is

therefore also about who becomes the center of normal school experience and who must adjust to majority norms (Utami, 2022).

This condition is consistent with findings by Dupper, Forrest-Bank, and Lowry-Carusillo (2015) regarding the experiences of religious minority students in public schools. They show that religious minority students may experience pressure, jokes, misunderstanding, or discomfort even in institutions that are formally open. Forrest-Bank and Dupper (2016) also show that religious minority students develop coping strategies to deal with difference and discrimination in school, including remaining silent, seeking support, or managing identity expression to avoid tension. Schools may accept students from different religious backgrounds, but such acceptance becomes inclusion only when minority students feel safe, recognized, and able to express their experiences (Dupper et al., 2015; Forrest-Bank & Dupper, 2016; Sapouna et al., 2023).

At the level of academic interaction, group work reveals two sides of asymmetric coexistence. On the one hand, group work creates space for interreligious encounter. The research data show that Muslim and non-Muslim students can work in the same groups, share tasks, and complete classroom assignments without open rejection. Informants stated that religious difference did not become an obstacle because students were more focused on completing academic tasks. However, intergroup contact theory explains that contact reduces prejudice most effectively when it is supported by relatively equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp et al., 2022).

Such academic cooperation is not yet sufficient to be called substantive tolerance. It is more accurately understood as functional contact, namely interaction that occurs because students share academic goals. Muslim students are not only the numerical majority, but also the symbolic majority in the school's language, norms, and religious activities. Meanwhile, institutional support in the form of safe mechanisms for expressing discomfort or guidelines for interreligious communication does not yet appear to function as a strong system. Interreligious contact is therefore ambivalent: it can become an entry

point for tolerance, but may remain limited to academic coexistence without reflection on minority experiences (Tropp et al., 2022).

Asymmetric coexistence becomes even clearer when examined through the concept of school belonging. Kuttner (2023) emphasizes that belonging is not merely a psychological feeling, but also a socio-political process related to the right to be present, to speak, to be recognized, and to become an active member of the school community. Graham, Kogachi, and Morales-Chicas (2022) further argue that belonging is strongly shaped by group representation; students in minority positions may implicitly question whether they truly fit and are accepted in school space. In this study, such questions emerge when non-Muslim students are present in a school that is administratively open but symbolically dominated by Islamic culture (Graham et al., 2022; Kuttner, 2023).

Thus, the absence of open conflict does not necessarily indicate equal tolerance. The research data show that relations between Muslim and non-Muslim students generally appear positive. They can build friendships, cooperate, and interact without rigid separation. However, surface harmony does not always indicate deep recognition. Taylor (1994) explains that identity is formed through social recognition, and the absence of recognition can produce symbolic wounds. In this context, non-Muslim students do not merely need to be "left undisturbed"; they need to be recognized as subjects whose experiences, sense of safety, and discomfort are legitimate and worth hearing. PAI that is relevant to multicultural schools therefore needs to move beyond administrative tolerance toward relational tolerance (Taylor, 1994).

Religious Language, Religious Humor, and the Symbolic Boundaries of Tolerance

The second finding shows that the boundaries of tolerance within the PAI ecosystem do not primarily emerge through open conflict, explicit rejection, or easily observable discriminatory policies. Rather, they appear in everyday communicative practices that are often considered trivial: religious jokes, identity-based forms of address, theological terms used in social interaction, and the silence of minority students when they feel uncomfortable. Several non-Muslim students stated that they felt

uncomfortable when religion-based jokes emerged, such as playful invitations to recite the *shahāda*, the use of the term "kafir" in jokes, or the use of "Nasrani" in social situations that made them feel marked as different. Such expressions are not always intended to hurt, but they can still create discomfort because they touch upon religious identity, which is personal and sacred (Hodge, 2020).

The analysis of religious language must be positioned carefully. Terms such as "kafir" and "Nasrani" have a place in the Islamic scholarly tradition as theological, historical, or textual categories. The issue examined in this study, therefore, is not the existence of these terms in an absolute sense, but their shift in function from theological categories to social labels within asymmetric student relations. In religious texts, these terms may be used to explain specific concepts academically. In student interactions, however, the same terms may acquire different meanings when used as forms of address, jokes, markers of difference, or material for ridicule. The social impact of a term is shaped not only by its theological origin, but also by its context of use, power relations, tone of speech, the speaker's position, and the experience of the person being addressed (Blumer, 1969; Hodge, 2020; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, language is never entirely neutral. It is a social symbol that carries meaning, position, and relation. Religious jokes become problematic not merely because of the words themselves, but because the meaning received by the target of the joke may differ from the intention of the speaker. For some Muslim students, a playful invitation to recite the *shahāda* may be perceived as spontaneous humor. For non-Muslim students, however, such an expression may be experienced as symbolic pressure because it touches the boundary of belief. The difference between the speaker's intention and the recipient's experience lies at the center of the problem. In social interaction, symbols are always interpreted from the position and experience of those involved (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

These findings show that tolerance cannot be adequately assessed simply by asking whether Muslim and non-Muslim students are friends. They may indeed build friendships, cooperate, and avoid open conflict. However, relationships that appear close may still contain tension when

humor considered light by the majority produces alienation for the minority. The data show that religious jokes do not carry a single meaning. Not all students occupy the same social position when laughing at religious symbols. Majority groups often have greater freedom to define an utterance as "only a joke," while minority groups bear the social risk when stating that the joke is hurtful. Under such conditions, religious humor is not merely a matter of politeness; it becomes a symbolic field in which majority-minority relations are negotiated (Dupper et al., 2015; Forrest-Bank & Dupper, 2016; Hodge, 2020).

The concept of symbolic boundaries helps explain why language and humor have strong social effects. Lamont and Molnár (2002) define symbolic boundaries as conceptual distinctions used by social actors to categorize people, practices, and identities. In the context of SMAN 1 Banjaran, symbolic boundaries do not always appear as prohibitions against interreligious friendship or as formal separation among students. Instead, they emerge subtly through language: who is treated as the norm, who is labeled, who is allowed to joke about whose identity, who must restrain themselves, and whose discomfort is dismissed as excessive sensitivity. In this study, such classification appears as a repeated communicative practice (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

In asymmetric relations, the majority group often has greater social authority to determine what is considered reasonable. When religious jokes occur, majority students may interpret them as ordinary humor, while minority students must consider whether it is safe to object. If they speak up, they risk being perceived as not relaxed, overly sensitive, or disruptive to the atmosphere of friendship. If they remain silent, their discomfort remains invisible to teachers and peers. At this point, religious humor becomes an informal mechanism that reproduces the boundary between "us" and "them" without necessarily producing open conflict. Symbolic exclusion does not always appear as explicit hatred; it may emerge through the normalization of majority language whose impact is not fully recognized (Hodge, 2020).

Microaggression refers to everyday verbal, behavioral, or symbolic messages that may convey subordination, stereotypes, or the assumption that certain identities are less normal than dominant identities. Hodge

(2020) develops the concept of spiritual microaggressions to explain subtle messages that demean a person's religious integrity. In this study, religious jokes can be read as religious microaggressions when they are experienced by non-Muslim students as messages that pressure, demean, or turn their identity into an object of humor (Hodge, 2020).

This study does not claim that all uses of religious terms automatically constitute microaggressions. Theological terms can be used legitimately in religious learning when the context is clear, the purpose is academic, and the delivery uses proportional pedagogical language. However, the same terms may become exclusionary when used as social labels, material for jokes, or markers of inferiority in majority-minority relations. This analysis does not accuse Muslim students of consciously committing discrimination; it shows that within a majority structure, ordinary humor can operate as symbolic pressure for the minority (Dupper et al., 2015; Hodge, 2020).

For example, jokingly asking non-Muslim students to recite the shahāda can position Muslim identity as the ideal norm and non-Muslim identity as something that can be teased or directed toward the majority identity. The message received by non-Muslim students may not stop at "this is only a joke." It may shift into the feeling that "my identity can be turned into a plaything within a majority space." Similarly, the term "kafir" in jokes carries symbolic weight because it may evoke distance, inside-outside boundaries, and moral status. Meanwhile, "Nasrani" becomes sensitive when used as an identity marker that makes students feel labeled (Blumer, 1969; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Mead, 1934).

The silence of non-Muslim students strengthens this reading. Some students choose to suppress discomfort because they worry that expressing objection might create new problems. Silence in this context is not the absence of experience, but a social strategy. Minority students may choose silence to maintain friendships, avoid conflict, or prevent themselves from becoming more visible as outsiders. Within asymmetric coexistence, silence becomes important data because it shows that surface harmony may depend on the minority's capacity to restrain themselves. Utami (2022) shows that in multireligious public schools, minority groups may accept unequal conditions because of weaker

bargaining positions and the desire to maintain school harmony. This study extends that argument to the micro level of everyday communication (Forrest-Bank & Dupper, 2016; Utami, 2022).

The findings of Dupper et al. (2015) regarding religious minority students in public schools also support this reading. The experiences of religious minorities in schools may appear as comments, stereotypes, teacher neglect, or situations that make students feel their identity is being questioned. Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali (2023), in their systematic review of victimization based on racial, ethnic, citizenship, and religious status, show that the vulnerability of minority students may appear in forms that are not always visible but still affect their sense of safety. In the context of SMAN 1 Banjaran, this vulnerability appears through language and humor that make non-Muslim students feel negatively different. The absence of open conflict, therefore, is not sufficient to conclude that tolerance is already functioning substantively (Dupper et al., 2015; Forrest-Bank & Dupper, 2016; Sapouna et al., 2023).

At this point, PAI teachers have a strategic role as curators of religious language. Teachers are not merely transmitters of material; they also manage the classroom's symbolic climate. They need to distinguish between theological terms used in learning and theological terms used as social labels. When certain terms appear in teaching materials, teachers can explain their academic and theological contexts while also affirming that such terms must not be used to mock, tease, or demean friends. Such agreements do not weaken Islamic teachings; rather, they reflect social adab in a plural society (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Rahmat & Yahya, 2022).

The teacher's role as curator of language is also related to the ability to transform communicative incidents into pedagogical reflection. When religious jokes occur, the teacher's response should move beyond prohibition toward ethical learning about hurtful speech, social impact, and Islamic adab toward people of different beliefs. In this way, PAI does not merely teach tolerance as a concept. It also trains students in role-taking, namely imagining how their words are heard by friends in different religious positions (Mead, 1934).

Beyond teachers, schools need to provide safe mechanisms for students who feel uncomfortable. If minority students have only two options—remaining silent or being perceived as creating a bigger problem—then tolerance will stop at surface harmony. Safe mechanisms may include dialogue spaces facilitated by teachers, counseling services sensitive to religious issues, or classroom procedures for expressing discomfort without humiliating particular parties. Communication norms and safety are therefore important parts of an educational ecology that prevents student vulnerability (Kuttner, 2023; Sapouna et al., 2023).

Religious language is therefore an important locus for the formation of tolerance. Language can become a medium of recognition when used sensitively, but it can also become a mechanism of exclusion when used as a label or joke within unequal relations. Religious humor intersects with four key elements: language, power, identity, and safety. In the context of SMAN 1 Banjaran, religious jokes and the silence of minority students show that tolerance cannot be adequately understood as a condition without conflict. Tolerance needs to be understood as a collective capacity to create a social space in which every student can be present without fear that their identity will become material for jokes (Hodge, 2020; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

From Normative Tolerance to Inclusive-Relational PAI

The third finding shows that the meaning of tolerance constructed by Muslim and non-Muslim students is neither singular, fixed, nor entirely identical. Tolerance does not appear merely as a moral value taught in PAI; it is also negotiated through friendship, group work, school religious activities, language, humor, and majority-minority relations. Thus, tolerance in this study is not understood as a linear movement from doctrine to behavior. PAI values provide a normative foundation, but these values acquire social meaning only when students interpret them through concrete interactions with peers from different religious backgrounds. Within this framework, tolerance is a construction of meaning that emerges from the encounter between teachings, experiences, symbols, and social relations (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Analytically, the findings reveal three layers of tolerance. The first

is normative tolerance, or tolerance as a moral and religious value expressed through mutual respect, non-coercion in belief, and non-discrimination. The second is lived tolerance, which appears in practices such as giving space for worship, cooperating without discrimination, and maintaining respectful speech. The third is relational tolerance, which enables students to feel safe, recognized, and treated as equal members of the learning community. This distinction is an analytical formulation developed from the research findings.

The data show that students understand tolerance as respect for difference without dissolving religious identity. One informant stated that tolerance does not mean following another person's religion, but respecting one another and giving space. It shows that tolerance is not theological relativism, but social recognition and an ethics of space that allows others to practice their beliefs without coercion. In students' experiences, therefore, tolerance does not move toward the dissolution of identity, but toward the ability to maintain religious boundaries while building just social relations (Mu'ti, 2023; Shihab, 2007).

In this context, PAI does not need to reduce its Islamic substance in order to become inclusive. Rather, inclusivity needs to be built upon the understanding that Islamic teachings on *tasāmuh,* civility*, li ta'ārafū*, and *rahmatan lil 'ālamīn* require social attitudes that respect human dignity. Q.S. al-Hujurāt [49]: 13 provides a foundation for understanding diversity as a space for knowing one another, not for negating one another. It must be translated into how students speak, joke, cooperate, and respond to the discomfort of their peers (Mu'ti, 2023; Shihab, 2007).

Differences in social position make the meaning of tolerance among Muslim and non-Muslim students not entirely the same. For Muslim students, tolerance tends to mean not forcing non-Muslim peers, maintaining friendship, respecting other religious practices, and not mixing religious beliefs. For non-Muslim students, tolerance is more closely related to experiences of safety: not being pressured to follow Islamic expressions, not being made the object of jokes, not being labeled with terms that make them uncomfortable, and still being recognized as part of the school community. This difference shows that tolerance is not merely an individual attitude, but a meaning shaped by social position.

For the majority, tolerance is often understood as giving space. For the minority, tolerance means obtaining space that is safe and recognized (Dupper et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2022; Taylor, 1994).

This distinction is important to avoid oversimplification. If tolerance is understood only from the majority's perspective, it may stop at the attitude of "not disturbing" or "remaining friends." Relational tolerance requires further questions: whether those who are different truly feel safe, whether they can express discomfort, whether the language used by the majority does not make them feel labeled, and whether teachers and schools provide mechanisms of recognition. Relational tolerance does not reject normative tolerance; it complements it. Normative tolerance provides the value foundation, while relational tolerance tests whether that value is alive in real interaction (Kuttner, 2023; Taylor, 1994).

At this point, the concept of Inclusive-Relational PAI is proposed as a pedagogical orientation. Inclusive-Relational PAI refers to an approach to PAI learning that remains rooted in Islamic teachings while consciously managing the learning process, language, humor, symbols, activities, and classroom interactions so that all students, including those from different religious backgrounds, feel safe, respected, and recognized as part of the learning community. The term "inclusive" refers to respect for all students without obscuring Islamic identity, while "relational" indicates that tolerance must be realized in everyday social relationships (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Rahmat & Yahya, 2022).

Inclusive-Relational PAI does not mean transforming PAI into a subject about all religions or weakening the firmness of Islamic creed. Within this framework, PAI teachers continue to teach Islam authentically, but the way they teach it takes into account students' experiences within a multicultural classroom ecosystem. Teachers should consider whether the language used is respectful, examples avoid stereotypes, minority students are not turned into objects of discussion, and the classroom provides a safe space for difference (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Mu'ti, 2023).

This concept is consistent with religious literacy and dialogical religious education. Jackson (2014) emphasizes that religious education

in a plural society should help students understand religion reflectively, contextually, and dialogically. In PAI, these ideas mean that Muslim students do not dissolve their beliefs, but learn that religious expression must be accompanied by adab toward people of different beliefs (Jackson, 2014).

Inclusive-Relational PAI has three main principles. The first is Islamic civility. This principle affirms that PAI remains grounded in Islamic teachings while protecting the dignity of others. Teachers can teach the concepts of creed, worship, and Islamic identity clearly, while also affirming that religious difference must not become a reason to demean, mock, or pressure others. Through this principle, tolerance is not understood as a compromise of creed, but as an expression of morality in a plural society (Mu'ti, 2023; Shihab, 2007).

The second principle is symbolic inclusion. This principle requires teachers and schools to pay close attention to the language, terms, examples, humor, and symbols used in learning. Inclusion does not merely mean that students from different religious backgrounds are present in the same school. It means that they do not feel like exceptions who are continuously marked. Teachers also need to ensure that learning activities do not turn non-Muslim students into objects of discussion. When learning discusses other religions or interreligious relations, teachers should use proportional, non-stereotypical language and create opportunities for reflection (Hodge, 2020; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The third principle is dialogical relations. This principle emphasizes that tolerance is formed through interaction that enables students to hear the experiences of others. Dialogue here is a safe space for discussing experiences of difference, including uncomfortable experiences. Teachers can use case studies about religious jokes, the use of labels, or group work situations to help students distinguish between intention and impact. In this way, PAI trains students to read social reality, not merely textual arguments for tolerance. In the context of PAI, the world that needs to be read is the concrete experience of how religious language can become either mercy or symbolic injury (Jackson, 2014; Mead, 1934).

Inclusive-Relational PAI also requires a shift in how the success of

tolerance is assessed. Schools often read tolerance through surface indicators: no fights, smooth activities, and no reports of conflict. This study shows that the absence of reports may reflect minority students' decision to remain silent. Therefore, tolerance needs relational indicators: students feel safe expressing discomfort, teachers respond to hurtful language, group work builds recognition, religious humor is not normalized, and students learn to understand others' positions. With such indicators, tolerance can move from asymmetric coexistence toward more equal relations (Kuttner, 2023; Sapouna et al., 2023; Taylor, 1994).

Conceptually, Inclusive-Relational PAI brings together Islamic values, symbolic literacy, recognition, and safe space. Islamic values provide the normative foundation that difference must be respected. Symbolic literacy helps students understand that language, terms, and humor have social impacts. Recognition ensures that the experiences of students from different religious backgrounds are considered legitimate and worthy of being heard. Safe space provides mechanisms through which discomfort can be expressed without fear of damaging relationships. Values without symbolic literacy may remain general advice. Literacy without recognition may become knowledge without empathy. Recognition without safe space may remain discourse. Safe space without values may lose ethical orientation (Jackson, 2014; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Taylor, 1994).

These findings extend studies on multicultural PAI, which have so far largely emphasized materials, teacher strategies, and religious moderation. Rahmat and Yahya (2022) show that inclusive PAI teaching materials can affect students' tolerance when the materials are directed toward respect for diversity. Afriyanto and Anandari (2024) show the importance of transforming PAI in multicultural contexts through an inclusive approach. This study adds that the inclusivity of PAI must also be tested at the micro level: language, humor, safety, group work, and recognition of minority experiences (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024; Rahmat & Yahya, 2022).

First, teachers establish communication norms from the outset so that religious identity is not used as material for mockery, pressure, or jokes. Second, teachers use tolerance materials to discuss concrete cases

close to students' lives, such as the use of religious terms in social interaction, the boundaries of joking, and ways of giving space for worship. Third, teachers design group work that is oriented not only toward task completion, but also toward experiences of equal cooperation. Fourth, teachers provide mechanisms for reflection, such as short journals, guided discussions, or classroom forums, so that students can express experiences of being respected or feeling uncomfortable. Through these steps, PAI does not lose its Islamic substance, but also does not turn away from the experiences of minority students (Afriyanto & Anandari, 2024).

Overall, the construction of tolerance among Muslim and non-Muslim students at SMAN 1 Banjaran moves from asymmetric coexistence toward the possibility of relational tolerance. At the stage of asymmetric coexistence, students from different religions live side by side, but their experiences are not fully equal. At the stage of symbolic negotiation, tolerance is tested through language, humor, labels, and the courage to express discomfort. At the pedagogical stage, PAI has the opportunity to transform the value of tolerance into inclusive-relational practice through the management of language, safe spaces, dialogue, and recognition. Thus, Inclusive-Relational PAI becomes a pedagogical necessity: a form of PAI rooted in Islamic teachings while building safe, just, and civilized social relations (Blumer, 1969; Kuttner, 2023; Utami, 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the meaning of tolerance among Muslim and non-Muslim students within the PAI learning ecosystem at SMAN 1 Banjaran cannot be adequately understood as the absence of conflict or as mere administrative coexistence. Tolerance is constructed through everyday experiences, interreligious interaction, group work, religious language, humor, symbols, and majority-minority relations. The findings reveal asymmetric coexistence, a condition in which students from different religious backgrounds are able to build friendships and cooperate with one another, yet their experiences of safety, recognition, and freedom to express discomfort are not fully equal.

The boundaries of tolerance are most clearly visible in everyday communication, particularly in religious jokes, the use of theological terms as social labels, and forms of humor that touch upon religious identity. For some majority students, such expressions may be perceived as ordinary or harmless. For minority students, however, they may operate as symbolic pressure. Therefore, PAI needs to move beyond normative tolerance toward Inclusive-Relational PAI: an approach to PAI learning that remains rooted in Islamic teachings while being sensitive to language, symbols, safe spaces, and the experiences of students from different religious backgrounds. Within this framework, PAI teachers play an important role as curators of religious language, facilitators of dialogue, and guardians of a classroom climate that is just, safe, and grounded in civility.

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