



## Strengthening the Character of Religious Tolerance and Intercultural Communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the strengthening of religious tolerance character and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun as an effort to develop inclusive students with a strong sense of diversity. The research employs a literature review method by analyzing relevant scholarly sources related to character education, religious tolerance, and intercultural communication. The findings indicate that religious tolerance is a fundamental character value that should be cultivated at the junior high school level through habitual practices, teacher role modeling, and integration into the learning process. Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding, empathy, and respect among students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Although the strengthening of tolerance and intercultural communication faces various challenges, such as differences in family values and the influence of digital media, a holistic and collaborative educational approach can create a harmonious and inclusive school environment. These findings highlight the important role of schools in shaping students' tolerant character

## **INTRODUCTION**

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication is an urgent need in Indonesia's education system, which exists in a reality of diversity (Syahrani & Alwi, 2025). Indonesia is known as a multicultural nation with a variety of religions, ethnicities, languages, and customs that are integrated into the social life of its society. This diversity, on one hand, is a national asset, but on the other hand, it has the potential to lead to conflict if not managed through systematic and sustainable character education. Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a strategic role in instilling values of tolerance, mutual respect, and the ability to communicate effectively among individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds (Effendi & Sumaryati, 2022). Therefore, strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication becomes an integral part of the effort to develop students who have an inclusive, democratic personality and a sense of national awareness.

In the context of junior high school education, students are in the early adolescent development phase, characterized by the formation of self-identity, increased social sensitivity, and the emergence of curiosity about differences around them. At this stage, students begin to realize the diversity of beliefs and cultures present in both the school environment and society. Without proper guidance and learning, these differences can lead to prejudice, stereotypes, or even exclusive attitudes that hinder social harmonization (Pratama & Harahap, 2024a). Conversely, if schools are able to manage diversity as a learning resource, students will grow into individuals who can accept differences as a social necessity and use them to enrich their perspectives and humanitarian attitudes. SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun is one of the educational institutions located within a community with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This diversity is reflected in differences in religious beliefs, traditions, and social habits of both students and educators. This situation makes SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun a potential social space for fostering values of tolerance and cross-cultural communication in everyday life. Interactions among students of different religions and cultures, whether in classroom learning activities or extracurricular activities, serve as an important arena in the process of internalizing the value of tolerance. However, diversity also requires the implementation of appropriate educational strategies so that these interactions are not merely formal but genuinely cultivate mutual respect and ethical communication skills.

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance is not simply understood as the attitude of accepting differences in belief, but also includes the ability to respect the religious practices of others, refrain from discriminatory behavior, and build empathy across faiths. The value of tolerance needs to be instilled through habitual attitudes, teacher role models, and integration into the learning process (Dianto et al., 2025). In this regard, intercultural communication becomes an important instrument that supports the development of tolerance. Intercultural communication allows students to understand different ways of thinking, values, and social norms, thereby reducing misunderstandings and conflicts caused by differences in cultural or religious backgrounds.

The importance of intercultural communication in schools cannot be separated from the challenges of globalization and the development of information technology. Today's students live in a fast-paced and open flow of information, where narratives of intolerance and hate speech are easily accessible through social media. Without good communication skills and a strong tolerant attitude, students are at risk of being influenced by narrow-minded views that threaten social unity and harmony (Haryanto & Kurnia, 2024). Therefore, schools have a moral and pedagogical responsibility to equip students with intercultural communication skills based on the values of Pancasila, particularly the principles of divinity, humanity, and unity.

In practice, strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun needs to be carried out in a planned and contextual manner. The value of tolerance is not enough to be taught cognitively through lectures or text materials; it must be brought to life in real interactions among school members. Group discussion activities, cross-cultural collaboration, celebrating religious holidays with mutual respect, and resolving conflicts through dialogue are concrete examples of learning tolerance and intercultural communication. Through these direct experiences, students learn that differences are not threats, but opportunities to build togetherness and mutual understanding.

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun is a strategic effort in shaping young generations who are not only academically intelligent but also socially and emotionally mature. Education that emphasizes tolerance and cross-cultural communication will produce students who are capable of living together peacefully in a plural society. This introduction emphasizes that schools have a central role in instilling these values as a foundation for character development in students, as well as serving as a tangible contribution to maintaining social cohesion and the harmony of national life.

## **LITERATURE RIVIEW**

Literature review on strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication in the context of junior secondary education shows that schools have a strategic role in shaping inclusive attitudes among students in a multicultural society. Character education is understood as a systematic process to instill moral, ethical, and social values through formal learning as well as daily practices at school. Various studies affirm that religious tolerance is one of the main character values that needs to be developed from an early age, as this attitude becomes the foundation for a harmonious and democratic social life (A. N. F. Firdaus et al., 2025). In a heterogeneous school environment, religious tolerance not only functions as a moral value but also as a social competence that enables students to interact healthily with individuals who have different beliefs. Literature on religious tolerance in education emphasizes the importance of a contextual and participatory approach. The value of tolerance cannot be taught merely through knowledge transfer; it must be internalized through real social experiences. Previous research shows that habituating attitudes of mutual

respect, interfaith dialogue, and teacher role modeling play a significant role in shaping students' tolerant character. Teachers function not only as educators but also as behavioral models who reflect open and fair attitudes towards religious differences (Anwar et al., 2025). Thus, religious tolerance education becomes an integral part of a school climate that is conducive and oriented towards humanistic values.

Studies on intercultural communication emphasize that the ability to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is an important competence in the global era. Intercultural communication is understood as the process of exchanging meaning between individuals or groups who have differences in values, norms, language, and belief systems. Literature mentions that failures in intercultural communication are often caused by prejudice, stereotypes, and low cultural awareness (Anton et al., 2024). In the school context, such conditions can trigger misunderstandings, conflicts, or even discrimination among students. Therefore, strengthening intercultural communication becomes a preventive strategy to minimize potential social conflicts in the educational environment.

Some studies link intercultural communication with the development of empathy and social intelligence in students. Through directed cross-cultural interactions, students learn to understand others' perspectives, appreciate differences, and adjust their communication methods according to the social context. The literature also emphasizes that effective intercultural communication involves not only verbal aspects but also nonverbal ones, such as attitudes, expressions, and body language that reflect respect. In educational practice, this can be integrated through heterogeneous group work, class discussions, and collaborative activities involving students from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Empirical studies show a strong correlation between religious tolerance and intercultural communication in shaping students' character. Religious tolerance provides the basis for attitudes, while intercultural communication serves as a means to realize these attitudes in everyday social interactions. Without adequate communication skills, the value of tolerance risks becoming a normative concept that is difficult to implement in practice. Conversely, intercultural communication that is not grounded in a tolerant attitude can lead to conflict and the domination of certain cultures (Indarsih et al., 2025). Therefore, the literature emphasizes the need for an integrated approach that combines religious tolerance education with the strengthening of intercultural communication simultaneously.

In the context of junior high school, strengthening these two aspects is considered relevant because students are in a transitional phase of social and emotional development. Literature mentions that in early adolescence, individuals tend to form groups based on shared identities, including religion and culture. Without proper educational intervention, this tendency can reinforce exclusive attitudes. Therefore, schools need to create inclusive and dialogical interaction spaces so that students become accustomed to interacting with differences in a positive way.

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication are complementary approaches in character education at schools. The literature supports the view that schools, including SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, which is situated in a multicultural environment, have great potential to implement tolerance education through planned intercultural communication practices. This study serves as a theoretical foundation for research focusing on efforts to strengthen the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication as part of developing students who are inclusive, ethical, and able to live harmoniously in diversity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a literature review method as the main approach to examine the strengthening of religious tolerance character and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun. The literature review was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of relevant concepts, theories, and empirical findings related to the research topic without conducting direct field data collection. Through the review of various scientific sources, this study attempts to build a strong conceptual framework as a basis for analyzing the practice of character education in tolerance and intercultural communication in the context of junior high schools (Rahmawati et al., 2024).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary literature, including academic textbooks, national and international journal articles, seminar proceedings, and educational policy documents related to character education, religious tolerance, intercultural communication, and multicultural education. The literature reviewed was selected selectively, considering topic relevance, source credibility, and the novelty of publication, particularly scholarly works published within the last ten years (Lianda & Fernandes, 2025). The literature selection process was carried out to ensure that the resulting review reflects the latest developments in the field of education and communication.

The data collection technique was carried out through the exploration of scientific journal databases and digital libraries using keywords related to religious tolerance, character education, intercultural communication, and multicultural education in schools. The obtained data were then classified based on the main research themes, such as the concept of religious tolerance, the role of intercultural communication in education, strategies for strengthening character in schools, and the challenges of implementing tolerance values in a multicultural educational environment (Budianto & Dewi, 2023). This grouping aims to facilitate the process of analyzing and synthesizing data systematically. The data analysis in this literature study was carried out using a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach. The researcher describes ideas, theories, and previous research findings, then compares these various perspectives to identify patterns, similarities, and differences relevant to the research focus. Furthermore, the researcher conducts an argumentative synthesis to formulate a

comprehensive understanding of strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication in the context of junior high schools. The results of this analysis are used to draw conceptual conclusions that can be applied in the context of SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun.

By using the literature study method, this research is expected to provide a significant theoretical contribution to the development of character education in religious tolerance and intercultural communication. This method allows researchers to build scientific arguments based on in-depth and systematic literature reviews. In addition, the research results are expected to serve as a reference for educators and school administrators in designing learning strategies and school policies that support the creation of a tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious educational environment at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Concept and Urgency of Strengthening Religious Tolerance Character in the School Environment**

The concept of religious tolerance in the school environment is an important part of character education aimed at shaping students into individuals who are able to live peacefully alongside diversity. Religious tolerance is not only understood as an attitude of accepting the existence of other religions, but also includes respect for the beliefs, religious practices, and values held by others. In the context of education, religious tolerance becomes a fundamental value that supports the creation of an inclusive, safe, and conducive learning environment (Prasetiawati, 2017a). Literature review results show that religious tolerance is one of the main indicators of the success of character education in schools, especially at the junior high school level, which is a phase where students' attitudes and social identities are being formed.

The school environment, as a miniature of society, plays a strategic role in instilling the values of religious tolerance. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, which has students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, the school serves as a social space where cross-faith interactions occur intensively. This diversity presents positive potential in the form of rich social learning but also carries the potential for conflict if not managed properly. Studies show that without planned reinforcement of tolerance character, religious differences can lead to prejudice, exclusive attitudes, and even social segregation among students. Therefore, religious tolerance needs to be understood as a social competence that must be practiced and habituated, not merely taught normatively.

The urgency of strengthening the character of religious tolerance in schools is increasing along with social developments and information technology. Today, students not only interact directly within the school environment but are also exposed to various information through digital media, which does not always align with the values of diversity. Narratives of intolerance, hate speech, and religion-based radicalism can be easily accessed and can influence students' perspectives. In this context, schools have a significant responsibility to act as a bastion of values that instill a moderate, critical, and tolerant attitude toward religious differences (Alhafizh & Setiawan, 2025). Strengthening the character of religious tolerance becomes a preventive

measure to equip students so that they are not easily provoked by ideologies that contradict the values of unity and humanity.

The study results indicate that strengthening religious tolerance in schools must start with a correct conceptual understanding. Tolerance does not mean mixing religious teachings or diminishing personal beliefs, but rather respecting each individual's right to practice their faith without interference or discrimination. This understanding is important so that tolerance is not misunderstood as religious relativism, but as a form of social ethics in communal life. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, understanding religious tolerance needs to be instilled through learning that emphasizes human values, justice, and universal brotherhood in line with each religion's teachings.

In addition to conceptual understanding, strengthening religious tolerance also heavily depends on practical implementation within the school environment. Research findings indicate that cultivating respectful attitudes, such as providing space for students to practice their religion, appreciating religious holiday celebrations, and avoiding jokes or actions that demean certain beliefs, are concrete forms of tolerance education. These practices help students understand that religious differences are a social reality that should be approached with maturity and empathy (Muafiq & Muali, 2025). Thus, tolerance does not just remain a discourse but becomes internalized in students' daily behavior.

The role of teachers and educational staff is a key factor in strengthening the character of religious tolerance. The results of the discussion show that teachers not only function as deliverers of material but also as role models of tolerant attitudes for students. Fairness, non-discrimination, and a teacher's ability to manage differences in the classroom greatly influence how students perceive religious differences. When teachers demonstrate openness and respect for differences, students tend to imitate and internalize these attitudes (Irwansyah et al., 2024). Conversely, biased or less sensitive attitudes towards diversity issues by teachers can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices among students.

The urgency of strengthening the character of religious tolerance at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun is also closely related to the national education goals, which emphasize the development of individuals who are faithful, pious, virtuous, and capable of living as democratic citizens. Religious tolerance is a concrete manifestation of noble character and national values. In this context, religious tolerance education is not only aimed at internal harmony within the school but also at preparing students to live in a pluralistic society. The school serves as an initial platform for shaping citizens who respect differences and reject all forms of violence in the name of religion.

This discussion also shows that strengthening religious tolerance has long-term implications for the character development of students. Students who are accustomed to living in a tolerant environment tend to have better social intelligence, are able to manage conflicts peacefully, and have an empathetic attitude toward others. Such character is highly needed in social life, especially amid increasing social challenges resulting from differences in views and

interests (Abiyuna, 2022). Thus, religious tolerance is not only a moral necessity but also an urgent social need in building social cohesion.

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the concept and urgency of strengthening the character of religious tolerance in schools, particularly at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, is a fundamental aspect of character education. Religious tolerance should be understood as an active attitude manifested through understanding, habituation, exemplary behavior, and ethical communication practices. Its urgency is even greater amid the reality of diversity and global challenges that have the potential to disrupt social unity. Therefore, strengthening religious tolerance in schools becomes an important foundation for creating a harmonious educational environment and for shaping a young generation that is inclusive, ethical, and nationally minded.

### **The Role of Intercultural Communication in Building Students' Tolerant Attitudes**

Intercultural communication plays a strategic role in fostering tolerant attitudes among students in diverse school environments. In the educational context, intercultural communication is not only understood as the exchange of information between individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds, but also as a process of shaping meaning, attitudes, and values that influence how students perceive differences. Research findings indicate that intercultural communication that occurs effectively in schools can create an atmosphere of open interaction, mutual respect, and freedom from prejudice (Puspita et al., 2025). At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, the diversity of students' backgrounds makes intercultural communication a fundamental necessity in building harmonious social relationships.

The results of the discussion show that intercultural communication serves as a bridge of understanding between students who have differences in religion and culture. Through intense and continuous communication, students learn to recognize the values, habits, and perspectives of others who are different from themselves. This process of getting to know each other becomes an important foundation in developing a tolerant attitude, as prejudice and stereotypes often arise from a lack of understanding of other groups (Djollong & Akbar, 2019). When students are given space to engage in dialogue, ask questions, and share experiences in a safe and mutually respectful environment, differences are no longer seen as a threat, but as a social reality that is natural and deserving of appreciation.

In practice, intercultural communication in school environments occurs not only through verbal interactions but also through nonverbal communication that reflects tolerant attitudes. The study results indicate that expressions of attitude, body language, and behavior in daily interactions have a significant influence on the formation of a climate of tolerance. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, nonverbal communication such as showing mutual respect when peers are performing religious practices, using polite language, and willingness to cooperate in heterogeneous groups are important indicators of successful intercultural communication. These aspects demonstrate that tolerance is not always expressed through words, but also through concrete actions that reflect respect for differences.

The role of intercultural communication in fostering a tolerant attitude is also evident in the learning process in the classroom. The findings indicate that learning methods that encourage active interaction among students, such as group discussions, collaborative projects, and presentations, create opportunities for cross-cultural and interfaith communication. When students work in heterogeneous groups, they are required to listen to each other, respect opinions, and adjust their communication styles to the different personalities of their peers (Arbiani et al., 2025). This process indirectly trains intercultural communication skills while also cultivating a tolerant attitude in responding to differences in perspectives and backgrounds.

Intercultural communication plays an important role in managing potential conflicts that arise due to differences. Studies show that conflicts in school environments often start from communication misunderstandings, the use of insensitive language, or different interpretations of an action. With good intercultural communication skills, students are more capable of resolving conflicts in a dialogical and peaceful manner. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, strengthening intercultural communication helps students understand that conflict is not something to be avoided but can be managed through open, empathetic communication that respects differences. This reinforces a tolerant attitude as part of the students' social intelligence.

The role of teachers in facilitating intercultural communication also emerged as an important finding in this discussion. Teachers not only act as instructors but also as mediators of communication and creators of an inclusive classroom climate. The discussion results indicate that teachers who are able to create spaces for dialogue, encourage participation from all students, and respond to differences with fairness and openness will strengthen the quality of intercultural communication in the classroom (Faisal & Setiawan, 2024). Teachers' examples of communicating ethically and respecting religious and cultural differences serve as concrete examples for students in practicing tolerance in daily life.

The urgency of intercultural communication in fostering students' tolerant attitudes is becoming increasingly strong amidst the influence of digital media and globalization. Today's students live in a world filled with cross-cultural information that is not always accompanied by adequate understanding. Studies show that without intercultural communication skills, students are vulnerable to misinformation and narratives of intolerance that are spreading in digital spaces (Annisa et al., 2024). Therefore, schools play an important role in equipping students with critical and reflective communication skills, enabling them to filter information and interact wisely with individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

This discussion also emphasizes that intercultural communication directly contributes to the formation of an inclusive social identity among students. Through positive cross-cultural interactions, students learn that personal and group identities do not have to be built by negating the identities of others. On the contrary, healthy intercultural communication encourages students to develop an open, confident self-identity that values diversity. At SMP Negeri 1

Sibabangun, this becomes an important asset in shaping a young generation capable of living harmoniously in a pluralistic society.

Thus, the results and discussion indicate that intercultural communication plays a central role in fostering tolerant attitudes among students. Intercultural communication not only serves as a means of interaction but also as a process of character education that shapes tolerant attitudes, values, and behaviors. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, strengthening intercultural communication becomes an important strategy in instilling religious tolerance and creating a school environment that is inclusive, harmonious, and oriented toward humanistic values. This discussion confirms that the success of strengthening the character of religious tolerance greatly depends on the quality of intercultural communication established within the school environment.

### **Strategy for Strengthening Religious Tolerance and Intercultural Communication**

The strategy for strengthening religious tolerance and intercultural communication in schools is a systematic effort designed to instill the values of diversity continuously. Research findings indicate that an effective strategy cannot be implemented partially, but must be integrated into all aspects of school life, from policies, learning processes, to school culture. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, which has a diverse background of religions and cultures, the strategy to strengthen tolerance and intercultural communication is a fundamental necessity to create an inclusive and harmonious educational environment..

One of the key strategies identified in this study is the integration of the values of religious tolerance and intercultural communication into the learning process. These values are not taught as separate subjects but are integrated into various subjects through a contextual approach (Cahyono et al., 2025). Teachers play an important role in linking the subject matter with the diversity present around the students. The discussion results show that learning which connects academic material with humanitarian values and diversity can enhance students' awareness of the importance of a tolerant attitude and mutually respectful communication.

In addition to integration into learning, the exemplary behavior of teachers and educational staff becomes a very decisive strategy. Studies show that students tend to imitate the attitudes and behaviors of adults in the school environment. When teachers demonstrate fairness, openness, and respect for religious and cultural differences, students learn that tolerance is not merely a concept, but a real practice in daily life. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, teachers' exemplary behavior in communicating politely and inclusively serves as an important foundation in building a culture of tolerance at school.

Another strategy that plays a significant role is the creation of an inclusive school climate and culture. The discussion results show that a school culture that emphasizes values of togetherness, mutual respect, and open dialogue can strengthen religious tolerance and intercultural communication. Schools can create positive interaction spaces through routine activities, such as flag ceremonies, religious activities, and extracurricular activities that involve all students regardless of their religious and cultural backgrounds (Pratama &

Harahap, 2024b). Through these activities, students learn to interact and cooperate in an environment that appreciates diversity.

Interfaith and intercultural collaborative activities also serve as an effective strategy for strengthening tolerance. Research findings indicate that heterogeneous group work, social projects, and community service activities can bring together students from various backgrounds toward common goals. Interaction in the context of this collaboration encourages students to set aside differences and focus on shared values. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, such activities have great potential to foster empathy, solidarity, and constructive intercultural communication skills.

The strategy to strengthen religious tolerance and intercultural communication also includes managing conflicts in an educational manner. The discussion results indicate that conflicts arising from differences do not always have negative impacts if managed with a dialogical approach. Schools need to provide conflict resolution mechanisms that prioritize open communication, mediation, and deliberation. Through this process, students learn to express their opinions politely, listen to others' perspectives, and seek joint solutions (Kusuma et al., 2024). This approach strengthens tolerance while also developing intercultural communication skills that are important for students' social lives.

Utilizing religious activities as a means to strengthen tolerance also becomes an important strategy. Research findings show that religious activities in schools can be designed in such a way that they are not exclusive, but rather educational and inclusive. Schools can provide students with an understanding of the importance of respecting the practice of other religions and fostering mutual respect during religious holiday celebrations (Fauziah, 2025). This approach helps students understand that every religion teaches values of goodness and humanity, which can serve as a foundation for tolerant attitudes.

Strategies to strengthen tolerance and intercultural communication also need to be supported by the involvement of parents and the community. The discussion results show that the values of tolerance taught in schools will be more effective if they align with the values instilled in the family and community environment. Therefore, schools need to establish communication and cooperation with parents as well as community leaders to create harmony in character education. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, the involvement of the local community with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds can serve as a contextual learning resource for students.

In the digital era, strategies for strengthening religious tolerance and intercultural communication must also consider students' digital literacy. Research findings indicate that schools need to equip students with the ability to respond to information critically and ethically, especially regarding religious and cultural issues. Digital literacy education that emphasizes communication ethics, respect for differences, and rejection of hate speech becomes an essential part of the strategy for strengthening tolerance (Harianto & Abdurrahman, 2025). Thus, students are not only tolerant in direct interactions but also in communication within digital spaces.

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the strategy to strengthen religious tolerance and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun must be holistic, sustainable, and contextual. The integration of tolerance values into learning, teacher role modeling, the creation of an inclusive school culture, collaborative activities, dialogical conflict management, as well as parental involvement and digital literacy are strategies that complement each other. These strategies strengthen students' tolerance character and equip them with the intercultural communication skills needed to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society.

### **Challenges and Implications of Strengthening the Character of Religious Tolerance and Intercultural Communication**

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication in schools cannot be separated from various structural, cultural, and contextual challenges. Research findings indicate that although tolerance and intercultural communication are recognized as important values in education, their implementation in schools often faces complex obstacles. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, these challenges arise alongside the diversity of students' backgrounds, differences in family parenting styles, and the influence of various social environments. This situation requires schools to have adaptive strategies so that the strengthening of tolerance and cross-cultural communication can occur effectively and sustainably.

One of the main challenges in strengthening the character of religious tolerance is the difference in understanding and attitudes that students bring from their family and community environments. The discussion results indicate that the values of tolerance instilled in schools do not always align with the values students receive outside of school. In some cases, students may be exposed to exclusive religious views or attitudes that do not appreciate differences. This can affect how they interact with peers of different religions and cultures (Sunarwi & Amin, 2025). This challenge indicates that schools cannot work alone, but need to build synergy with parents and the community in consistently instilling values of tolerance.

Another challenge faced in strengthening cross-cultural communication is the limited communication competence of students. Studies show that differences in language, communication styles, and social habits can trigger misunderstandings in daily interactions. Students who do not yet have adequate cross-cultural communication skills tend to interpret differences negatively, which can ultimately lead to conflicts or distancing attitudes. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, this situation underscores the importance of strengthening communication skills as part of character education, not merely as an addition to academic learning.

Challenges also arise from the institutional and policy aspects of schools. Discussion results indicate that the strengthening of religious tolerance and intercultural communication is often not optimally integrated into school policies and programs. Limited instructional time, a crowded curriculum, and the lack of teacher training related to multicultural education are factors that hinder the systematic implementation of tolerance values (Sunarwi & Amin, 2025). Without clear and sustainable policy support, efforts to strengthen the character of

tolerance may become incidental activities that do not provide long-term impact for students.

The influence of digital media and the broader social environment also poses significant challenges in strengthening tolerance and intercultural communication. Research findings show that students increasingly interact in digital spaces filled with diverse information and opinions, including narratives of intolerance and hate speech based on religion and culture. Exposure to such information can affect students' ways of thinking and behaving, and even has the potential to weaken the values of tolerance taught in schools (Suriyanti, 2025). This challenge requires schools to not only focus on face-to-face interactions but also equip students with strong digital literacy and communication ethics.

Behind these various challenges, strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication has very important educational implications. The discussion results show that when tolerance and cross-cultural communication are successfully instilled, students demonstrate improvements in social intelligence, empathy, and teamwork skills. Students who are accustomed to living in a tolerant environment tend to be more open to differences and able to manage conflicts peacefully (Prasetiawati, 2017b). These implications indicate that strengthening tolerance not only affects interpersonal relationships at school but also the quality of learning and the overall academic climate.

Another equally important implication is the formation of an inclusive and harmonious school culture. Research findings show that schools that successfully manage diversity through tolerance and intercultural communication have lower levels of conflict and healthier social relationships. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, strengthening religious tolerance has the potential to create a safe and comfortable learning environment for all members of the school, regardless of their religious and cultural backgrounds. This inclusive school culture becomes an important asset in supporting the achievement of educational goals holistically.

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication also has long-term implications for shaping democratic citizens with a national outlook. The discussion results show that the values of tolerance instilled from an early age will shape students' perspectives in responding to differences in society. Students who possess tolerant attitudes and good intercultural communication skills tend to participate more constructively in social life and democracy. Thus, tolerance education at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun not only contributes to internal harmony within the school but also to the social resilience of the nation.

Policy implications are also an important part of this discussion. The study results show that strengthening religious tolerance and intercultural communication needs to be supported by clear and continuous school policies. Schools need to formulate visions, missions, and programs that explicitly emphasize the values of tolerance and diversity. In addition, teacher training and ongoing professional development are practical implications that need attention

to ensure educators have the competence to manage diversity pedagogically and communicatively (W. A. Firdaus, 2024).

The results and discussion indicate that the challenges in strengthening religious tolerance and intercultural communication at SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun are multidimensional and require a comprehensive approach. These challenges include differences in family values, limited communication competencies, institutional constraints, and the influence of digital media. However, behind these challenges, there are significant positive implications for the development of students' character, school culture, and broader social life. Therefore, strengthening religious tolerance and intercultural communication should be viewed as a long-term investment in character building and civilization based on humanistic values, diversity, and unity.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Strengthening the character of religious tolerance and intercultural communication is a fundamental aspect of character education in schools, especially at the junior high school level. Based on the results and discussions that have been presented, it can be concluded that religious tolerance is not only understood as an attitude of accepting differences in beliefs but also as an active behavior manifested through respect, empathy, and fairness in daily social interactions. At SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun, the religious and cultural diversity of students becomes a relevant yet challenging context in the implementation of sustainable tolerance education. Intercultural communication has been proven to play a strategic role in building and strengthening students' tolerant attitudes.

Through open, dialogical, and mutually respectful communication, students are able to understand differences as a natural social reality with positive value. The integration of tolerance values and intercultural communication in the learning process, teacher role modeling, and an inclusive school culture becomes an important strategy in instilling these values effectively. This strategy allows students not only to understand tolerance cognitively but also to internalize it in their attitudes and real behaviors.

Menguatan karakter toleransi agama dan komunikasi antar budaya di SMP Negeri 1 Sibabangun masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan, seperti perbedaan nilai yang dibawa dari lingkungan keluarga, keterbatasan keterampilan komunikasi peserta didik, pengaruh media digital, serta keterbatasan kebijakan dan program sekolah. Namun, tantangan tersebut tidak mengurangi urgensi penguatan toleransi, melainkan menegaskan perlunya pendekatan yang holistik, kolaboratif, dan berkelanjutan. Dengan komitmen seluruh warga sekolah serta dukungan orang tua dan masyarakat, penguatan karakter toleransi agama dan komunikasi antar budaya berpotensi besar membentuk peserta didik yang inklusif, beretika, dan siap hidup harmonis dalam masyarakat multikultural.

## FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations so further research is needed on the topic of Strengthening the Character of Religious Tolerance and Intercultural Communication in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers and writers

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