



Peace Education and the Empathy Dimension of Tolerance in Indonesian Higher Education

A Cross-Institutional Predictive Study

Immanuel Geovasky

Univ. Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Tabita Kartika Christiani

Univ. Kristen Duta Wacana, Indonesia

Dicky Sofjan

Univ. Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf

Univ. Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

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Keywords

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Abstract

Peace education serves as a critical intervention against the rising tide of religious intolerance and polarization in Indonesia, forces that directly threaten societal well-being and peace, particularly within the higher education context. This quantitative study investigates how students' perceptions of peace education predict their reported levels of tolerance. Utilizing regression analysis of survey data collected from undergraduate students at both a Christian university (Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana) and an Islamic university (Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Results demonstrated that peace education significantly predicts tolerance, showing the strongest association with empathy (R-squared = 0.547), far outpacing its predictive power on fairness (29.7%) and reasonableness (48.1%). This reinforces the value of interactive and experiential pedagogies as strong statistical predictors of affective relational change. This high-capacity empathy constitutes the critical nexus for recognizing and honouring the inherent dignity of the religiously other, thereby fulfilling the theological imperative for reconciliation, depolarization, and co-creating holistic peace in a pluralistic society. The article concludes by emphasising the imperative for higher education to adopt empathy-centred curricula intentionally, thereby equipping graduates for relational human flourishing.

Corresponding Authors: Imanuel Geovasky, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Email: imanuelgeovasky@mail.ugm.ac.id

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1. Introduction

Intolerance among Indonesian youth is a growing concern, exacerbated by factors like radicalization. Murtadlo (2021) demonstrates that certain state universities have become breeding grounds for intolerance and radicalization. The National Counter Terrorism Agency (in Bahasa Indonesia: *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* [BNPT]) states that 7 state universities in Indonesia are exposed to intolerant and radical views (Mukhibat et al. 2024). Chaney and Sahoo (2020) further emphasized that radicalism leads to intolerant actions against democratic principles, freedom of opinion, and expression, as well as human rights. According to Mukhibat et al. (2024), intolerance in Indonesia is caused by an education system where educators are less equipped with training and professional development on teaching diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance in a plural society. This provides an overview of the state of affairs in education, especially higher education in Indonesia, which faces intolerance and radicalization problems. This needs to be a serious concern for many different stakeholders, and an in-depth study of this matter is required.

Educational institutions, particularly at the higher education level, are critical in addressing this issue by fostering interreligious tolerance through peace education. Fanani (2022) underlines that universities are the vanguard of peace education. In Indonesia, this is implemented in Tri Dharma, which refers to teaching, research, and community service. Core functions distinguish higher education from primary, secondary, and tertiary education. As for teaching, peace education can be applied in curriculum development, special courses, and adult education methods. The Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga (or UIN Sunan Kalijaga) offers peace education courses for undergraduates and a Master's degree in Religious Studies with a specialty in Conflict and Peace Studies. Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (or UKDW) provides undergraduate courses on peace education and, since 2014, has provided a Master's program in Conflict and Peace Studies, with specializations in practical theology and peace studies. In addition, a Master's program in Peace and Conflict Resolution was opened at Universitas Gadjah Mada in 2002 (Fanani 2022).

The main purpose of peace education is to cultivate in children, adolescents, and adults’ cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours promoting peaceful living. As stated by UNESCO (2005), peace education should be part of social, cultural, and national concerns. In this way, the blending of culturally anchored principles with universal human values may deepen peace education and improve its implementation proposals. Thus, peace education will finally be able to contribute properly to the development of a peaceful mind in people, giving them behaviours fit for harmonious living, to build a culture of peace and nonviolence (UNESCO 2005).

UNESCO’s World Heritage in Young Hands: An Educational Resource Kit for Teachers (1998) supports a three-legged stool for peace education: knowledge, attitudes, and skills (behaviour). Knowledge purports to impact conflict resolution, human rights, and cultural diversity so that students can reflect more critically about societal concerns and question preconceived ideas. It aims to enable the learning of attitudes that are particularly essential in building a common identity and respect: accountability, mutual understanding, and tolerance. These abilities include communication, negotiation, and problem-solving, which allow individuals to engage in productive talks, settle issues non-violently, and actively participate in the process of developing peaceful communities. Peace education includes all three dimensions, allowing individuals to become change agents for a more just and peaceful world (UNESCO 2005). Thus, peace education consists of three main components: cognitive knowledge, affective empathy, and psychomotor skills and conduct that help to develop a culture of peace (UNESCO 2005; Navarro-Castro and Norio-Galace 2008; Fanani 2022).

Effective peace education is designed with the culture or nation’s context in consideration (Salomon 2002; Harris 2002). Thus, Indonesian peace education has its origin in the country’s specific setting. According to Fanani (2022), the sociopolitical framework of Indonesia is based on the culture and self-perception of the Indonesian people as a friendly nation living in harmony and cooperation, known as *gotong-royong* in Bahasa Indonesia, with high religious values. But violence is also a phenomenon in Indonesia. This goes back to the transition period between the Old Order and the New Order, when political turmoil in the 1960s resulted in the killing of hundreds

of thousands of people believed to be Indonesian Communist Party members. In recent years, Fanani (2022) has pointed out that violence in Indonesian schools is very alarming, starting from bullying in elementary schools to physical fights between students and teachers in higher-order schools. This condition underlines how urgently peace education needs to be integrated into the Indonesian education system.

Several peace education researchers reflect a significant correlation between religious tolerance and a comprehensive educational approach. According to Smith (2010), peace education could provide a way for various religious groups to understand and tolerate each other. By appreciating cultural and political diversity, peace education could allow students to be more tolerant and reflective individuals (Smith 2010). Schulte (2022) emphasizes the crucial role of peace education in promoting a culture of nonviolence, peace, equality, and sustainability within the educational agenda.

This strong correlation between tolerance and peace education is further strengthened by several empirical studies. Roth and Sumarto (2015) investigated the impact of a large-scale educational initiative in Indonesia on the causal link between education and tolerance towards different races and religions. Their findings indicate that higher levels of education lead to increased interethnic and interreligious tolerance. In a related study, Rukiyanto et al. (2024) explored the role of religious education in higher education in Indonesia regarding respect for diversity among university students. Based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted with university students in Yogyakarta, the authors concluded that religious education plays a crucial role in fostering respect for plurality and promoting a positive attitude towards diversity among students.

The theory of tolerance, as defined by Rivka T. Witenberg (2019), provides a framework, highlighting three key components: justice (fairness), empathy, and rationality (reasonableness). Witenberg's (2019) study shows that tolerance has become an important research topic in an increasingly multicultural world. Due to migration and globalization, monocultural societies will fade away. Tolerance is needed when people are confronted with the fact that there are differences in various aspects of life based on ethnic

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identity, race, religion, nationality, and so on. In 1995, UNESCO declared November 16 to be a Day of Tolerance and Peaceful Coexistence annually in memory of human rights and dignity (Witenberg 2019).

Witenberg (2019) argues that “tolerance is the conscious affirmation of favorable judgments and beliefs involving principles of justice, equality (fairness), care (empathy), and consideration for the plight of others (rationality)” (p. 5). Witenberg (2019) uses the lens of human developmental psychology to understand tolerance. She looks at how tolerance develops in young children, youths, adults, and senior citizens. According to Witenberg (2019), justice, empathy, and rationality are the three components on which tolerance has to be built. In an individual’s interactions with others, fairness is treating individuals equally and with a feeling of fair play, based on justice. Empathy is the capacity to comprehend and experience another person’s feelings, which results in actions that are helpful to people from all backgrounds. Empathy and conflict resolution are fostered by reasonableness, which encourages rational and open discussion among differing viewpoints (Witenberg 2019). Witenberg’s view resonates with Forst’s perspective (2013), namely that, in terms of tolerance, not only is an understanding that accepts differences required, but empathy is also required, especially towards individuals and groups who are different.

In this discourse on tolerance, Suhadi et al. (2018) proposed two terms that describe the characteristics of tolerance in Indonesia, namely costly tolerance and cheap tolerance, inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1994) thoughts on costly grace and cheap grace in Christian theology (Koffeman 2016). Cheap tolerance is only lip service and superficial, and is easily shaken because it does not describe a truly tolerant attitude towards different people and groups. Meanwhile, costly tolerance requires a willingness to accept one another fully, even to give up the power often attached to the majority group (Suhadi et al. 2018). Tolerance is a concept and practice that is still being debated, and there is no single definition either in the academic world or in society due to differences in views and beliefs from various individuals and religious groups. Increasing intolerance and social divides have posed challenges to communal harmony and human well-being (Volf 2011). This model of polarization destroys any possibility for diverse communities to live in peace,

thus negatively affecting the well-being of individuals and society alike. Religious organizations, and those that gather in community around churches or mosques, have a special role to play because conflict transformation is often about reinforcing values of tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect (Volf 2011; Lederach 2010).

Peace education has developed as a potent pedagogical strategy for fostering these social virtues that are vital to interfaith harmony (Reardon 2002). The affective capacity for empathy (the ability to feel what the other feels) that undergirds peaceful co-existence and relationship flourishing is deliberately cultivated through experiential and dialogical practices in peace education (Freire 1970). Developing empathy early in young adulthood suggests that religious contexts can build a bridge between those who are different and help to break down barriers of prejudice and ignorance (Eck 2000).

Christian theology of human flourishing has its foundation in the biblical thought on *Imago Dei* (meaning “image of God”) as it teaches that every person is created in the image and likeness of God, therefore endowed with inherent dignity and a relational calling (Grenz 2001; Volf 2011). This ontological foundation frames flourishing as a holistic existence that includes right relationships with God, self, others, and creation directed towards shalom, meaning of wholeness, peace, and well-being (Moltmann 2004). Or life with God as it was meant to be lived: in harmony with the purposes of God and agape love, which shows up among other places as compassion and neighbourly reconciliation (in a pluralistic society).

In Islamic theology, human well-being is also described as a holistic and multidimensional unfoldment of self, but with a focus on the development of moral (spiritual) virtues or *Husn-i-Akhlaaq* (character excellence) and the central role of humans as Khalifah (vicegerents) to care for the earth and ethical responsibility towards others (Nasr 2006; Kamali 2008). The concept of *Insan-i-Kamil* as a utopian type representing the end stage of spiritual and ethical growth, where well-being is to be had by observing divine commands and exemplifying justice and compassion in the community (Rahman 1980; Esposito 2011). Islamic prosperity incorporates maintaining the basic principles in *Maqasid al-Shariah* as well as social peace, honour, and

balanced interaction of human life, both physical and spiritual (Kamali 2008; Ahmad 2020).

By using Witenberg’s (2019) dimensions of tolerance, which are fairness, empathy, and reasonableness, this research attempts to quantify the behaviours and attitudes of students in relationships with others from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. According to this theory, the development of students in terms of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness greatly contributes to enhancing their capacity for tolerance, with a view toward communal peaceful coexistence and inclusivity (Witenberg 2019).

This study aims to measure the predictive capacity of peace education programs on these aspects of tolerance. The main research question guiding this study is: to what extent is students’ perception of peace education associated with their reported attitudes and behaviours toward religious tolerance and peace in UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UKDW?

2. Method

This study utilized a quantitative approach, employing a survey with questionnaires. The survey includes questions about attitudes towards other religions, experiences with interreligious interactions, and knowledge of other religions after the respondents enrolled in the peace education courses. The closed-ended questions will use Likert scales to assess students’ levels of agreement with statements related to peace education and tolerance (Stockemer 2019).

The participants were undergraduate students from UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UKDW enrolled in specific peace education courses: 27 students of Social and Religious Conflict Resolution (*Resolusi Konflik Sosial dan Keagamaan*) and 30 students of Interreligious and Cultural Communication (*Komunikasi Lintas Agama dan Budaya*). At UKDW, the Peace Education (*Pendidikan Perdamaian*) course had 32 students during the even semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. For the validity and reliability test of the questionnaires, the respondents are from the Basic Civic Education (*Pendidikan Dasar Kewarganegaraan*) course in the even semester of 2024-2025, Faculty of

Divine Philosophy (Theology), UKDW, with as many as 44 respondents. The questionnaires were completed on each campus between May 23 and June 3, 2025, with a total of 103 students responding.

The independent variable was peace education, measured through indicators in the cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains. The dependent variable was tolerance, measured through the dimensions of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness. In accordance with institutional practices for non-medical educational research, formal committee ethics approval was not required; however, standard ethical procedures were followed. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and all responses were kept strictly anonymous.



Figure 1 Variables of the Quantitative Research

Regression analysis is used to determine the strength and significance of the relationship between the variables. The analysis involved examining ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) to assess significance, and R-squared values to quantify the explanatory power of the model. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.60 (Field 2013). The hypothesis considered for this regression model is that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral indicators of peace education are significant predictors of the dimensions of fairness, empathy, and reasonableness in tolerance.

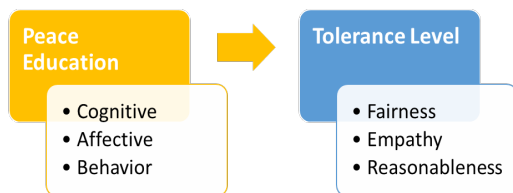


Figure 2. The dimensions of the independent and dependent variables

3. Result

Validity and reliability tests were carried out with student respondents in the Civic Education course in the even semester of 2024-2025, Faculty of Divine Philosophy (Theology), UKDW, with as many as 44 respondents, conducted on Tuesday, March 11, 2025, at 14:30 WIB. By using the Pearson Product-Moment analysis for the validity test, five invalid statements out of fifty statements were dropped from the questionnaire.

Independent variable reliability test results (x)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
0,745	20

Dependent variable reliability test results (y)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
0,750	30

According to Sujarweni (2014), if the Cronbach’s Alpha value is > 0.60 , the questionnaire is declared reliable.

The survey was conducted on UIN Sunan Kalijaga undergraduate students and UKDW who took peace education courses in the even semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. At UIN Sunan Kalijaga, there were courses on Social and Religious Conflict Resolution and Interfaith and Cultural Communication. At UKDW, there was a course in Peace Education. The questionnaires were completed on each campus between May 23 and 27, 2025, with a total of 103 students responding.

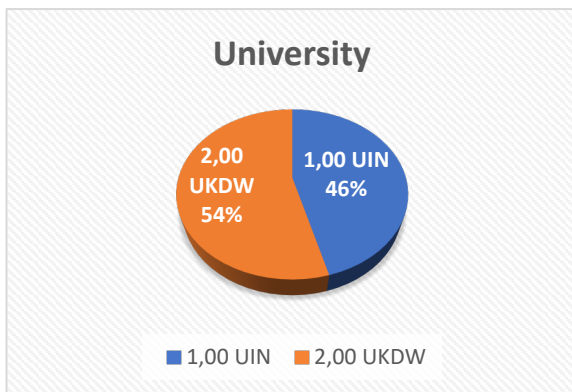


Figure 3. Respondents based on university

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be seen that of the total sample, 46% came from UIN, while the remaining 54% came from UKDW. Thus, UKDW had slightly more representatives than UIN.

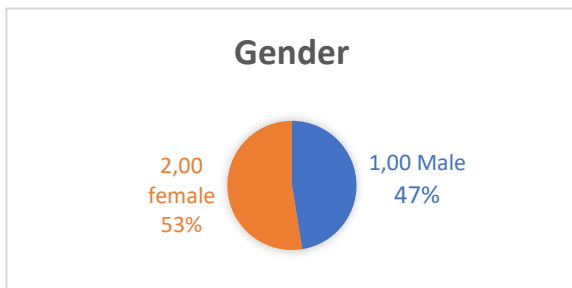


Figure 4. Respondents based on gender

Based on the pie chart presented, demographic data shows a fairly balanced gender difference. The blue section, representing males, has a percentage of 47%. Meanwhile, the orange section, representing females, has a slightly higher percentage of 53%. Overall, the female population is more dominant than the male population, although the difference is not significant.

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be concluded that of the total data available, 54% came from the Engineering department, while the remaining 46% came from the Religious Studies department. This shows that the number of respondents or subjects from the Engineering department was slightly higher than those from the Religious Studies department.

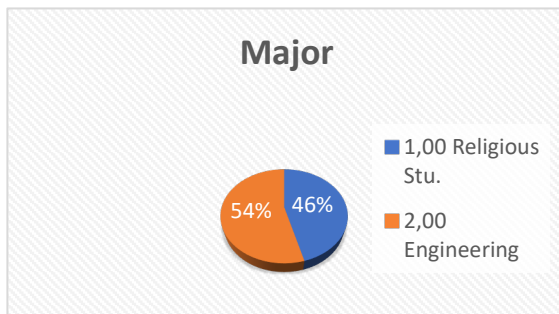


Figure 5. Respondents based on major

Based on the pie chart provided, it can be concluded that the majority of the data comes from respondents who are Muslim, accounting for 49%. The second largest group is Protestant, accounting for 39%, and the last is Catholic, accounting for 12%.

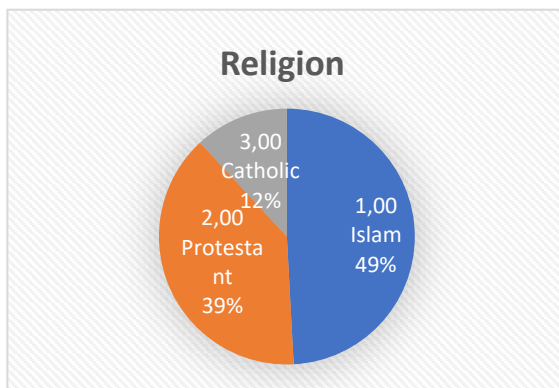


Figure 6. Respondents based on religion

Regression Analysis Result of Variables X and Y

The regression analysis results of the independent variable of peace education on the dependent variable tolerance show the ANOVA values (F) at 62.777 and Coefficients (t) at 7.923 with Sig. at 0.000, which means that the peace education variable is a statistically significant predictor of the tolerance variable. And the R-squared value of 0.524 illustrates that tolerance among the students studied is predicted by peace education by 52.4%.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5450.289	1	5450.289	62.777	.000 ^b
	Residual	4948.694	57	86.819		
	Total	10398.983	58			

a. Dependent Variable: Toleransi
 b. Predictors: (Constant), Pendidikan_Perdamaian

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.724 ^a	.524	.516	9.31768	1.813

a. Predictors: (Constant), Pendidikan_Perdamaian
 b. Dependent Variable: Toleransi

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	23.214	10.517		2.207	.031		
Pendidikan_Perdamaian	1.110	.140	.724	7.923	.000	1.000	1.000

Table 1. Table of Regression Results: Peace Education Dimensions on Tolerance Dimensions

Peace Education Dimensions (Independent Variables)	Dependent Variable (Tolerance Dimension)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Fairness	0.000 (Significant)	0.297	29.70%
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Empathy	0.000 (Significant)	0.547	54.70%
Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral	Reasonableness	0.000 (Significant)	0.481	48.10%

The results of the regression analysis of the dimensions of peace education (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) on the dimensions of tolerance (Table 3), especially fairness, are shown by the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, indicating significance. The R-squared value for this analysis is 0.297. This means that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education specifically predict 29.7% of the tolerance dimension of student fairness.

In the regression analysis of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education on the empathy dimension of the tolerance variable, the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, meaning significant. The R-squared value in this analysis is 0.547. This shows that the empathy dimension of student tolerance is predicted by 54.7% by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education.

Regression analysis of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education on the reasonableness dimension of the tolerance variable shows the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000, meaning significant. While the R-Squared value in this analysis is 0.481. This means that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of peace education predict the reasonableness dimension of tolerance by 48.1%.

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing gender

Table 2. Table of Regression Results: Peace Education and Tolerance, Stratified by Gender

Gender	Independent Variables	Dependent Variable (Tolerance)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
Male	Peace Education	Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.488	48.80%
Female	Peace Education	Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.53	53.00%

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing male gender demographic data showed the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t), 0.000 means significant. As for male gender respondents, based on the R-Squared value of 0.488, it is found that the effect of peace education on tolerance is 48.8%. Variant regression analysis by distinguishing female gender demographic data showed the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. As for female gender respondents, based on the R-squared value of 0.530, it is found that the prediction of peace education on tolerance is 53%.

Variant regression analysis by distinguishing the university and the study program

Table 3. Regression Analysis Summary: Predictive Value of Peace Education on Tolerance by University and Study Program

University	Study Program	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable (Perception of Tolerance)	ANOVA (F) & Coefficients (t) Significance	R-Squared (R ²)	Percentage of Variance Explained
UIN Sunan Kalijaga	Religious Studies	Peace Education	Perception of Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.618	61.80%

UKDW	Informatics Systems and Informatics Engineering	Peace Education	Perception of Tolerance	0.000 (Significant)	0.458	45.80%
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In the regression analysis of UIN Sunan Kalijaga student respondents, it was found that the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. The R-squared value is 0.618, indicating that among students of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, the predictive relationship of peace education on their perception of tolerance is 61.8%. Note that these UIN students are from the Religious Studies program. In the regression analysis of UKDW student respondents, it was found that the ANOVA values (F) and Coefficients (t) at 0.000 means significant. The R-squared value is 0.458, indicating that among students of UKDW, the predictive relationship of peace education on their perception of tolerance is 45.8%. With a note that these UKDW students come from engineering study programs, namely system informatics and technical informatics.

4. Discussion

The findings present a substantial positive predictive relationship between peace education and tolerance, with 52.4% of the variation in tolerance among the students accounted for by peace education (ANOVA (F) and (t) sig. 0.000). This gives immediate meaning to the “to what extent” component of this research question, showing a clear and nearly half-influence relationship. The collective significant predictive relationship of peace education (52.4% effect) demonstrates that this structured and multi-faceted approach is effective in communicating knowledge and fostering tolerant attitudes (UNESCO 2005; Reardon 1988; Navarro-Castro and Norio-Galace 2008; Fanani 2022).

Influence across tolerance dimensions

Breaking down the variables, the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of peace education significantly predict individual elements of tolerance. Empathy is the most strongly predicted dimension, with 54.7% of

its variance explained by peace education. This suggests that peace education is highly effective in building students' ability to understand and share empathy, compassion, symbolic forgiveness, tolerance, and respect for people from different religions (Witenberg 2019). Reasonableness has a significant impact of 48.1%, revealing that peace education greatly influences students' ability for logical, just judgment, challenging prejudice, and open-mindedness on interreligious relations (Witenberg 2019). Fairness, although still significantly predicted, has a lesser R-squared of 29.7%. This suggests that peace education plays a role in students' perception of fairness, equality, and non-discrimination (Witenberg 2019), albeit relatively low compared to other dimensions. It might be related to the cultural aspect of Indonesian society, as there is no direct translation of the term "fairness" in Bahasa Indonesia. The greatest predictive capacity of peace education is the empathy factor (54.7%). Such a strong predictive capacity on empathy indicates that pedagogical methods with a focus on direct interfaith encounters and experiential learning are especially effective, as empathy is usually fostered through genuine interaction and familiarity with the other's worldview.

In order to comprehend why these results are produced, the actual teaching practices within the classroom need to be considered. The peace education classes that have been studied do not confine themselves merely to lecturing, but incorporate more practical learning approaches, such as interfaith dialogue exercises, direct contacts with civil society, case studies, cross-cultural site visits, collaborative work with NGOs, and journal writing. Instead of looking at issues related to peace and tolerance in an abstract way, these practical and interactive teaching practices force students to face different religious, social, and cultural views. These kinds of teaching practices transform the learning experience from a cognitive one to an affective one, thereby creating the rationale behind the correlation between peace education and tolerance's empathy component.

Influence across gender demographics

The analysis also reveals nuanced differences across gender: For female students, peace education accounts for 53% of the variation in tolerance. For male students, the effect is slightly lower, at 48.8%. Both are significant,

suggesting that peace education is effective across genders, but marginally more impactful on female students’ tolerance levels in this sample. This suggests a deeper reflection on the role of gender balance in promoting tolerance and peace. These statistics show that women are more tolerant in interfaith relations; hence, women merit a greater role in promoting tolerance and peace in both academic and societal contexts.

Influence across study programs and universities

A key result arises from the university-level analyses. In UIN Sunan Kalijaga, where students are taking the Religious Studies program, peace education explains a very large 61.8% of the variance in tolerance. This suggests that the environment and content of a religious studies program can be very conducive to the predictive capacity of peace education on tolerance. In contrast, at UKDW, where the students come from engineering study fields (System Informatics and Technical Informatics), the predictive capacity stands at 45.8%. This difference highlights the potential role of the academic discipline and its inherent focus (or lack thereof) on interreligious dialogue and societal dynamics in influencing the effectiveness of peace education. Students already enrolled in religious studies are more receptive to or exposed to concepts that more readily reflect peace education goals, or that the very design of curriculum within religious studies programs inherently embraces peace education principles more essentially. This confirms the contextual dynamics in designing and implementing peace education, whereby peace education must be developed in a specific context in accordance with the circumstances faced by the learners (Salomon 2002, Harris 2002).

The significant overall predictive capacity, particularly at UIN (61.8%), where the theological basis is well-established, is proof of the effectiveness of this founding approach. The far greater predictive capacity of peace education in the Religious Studies program (61.8%) compared to Engineering programs (45.8%) indicates the seriousness and applicability of the study field and its natural alignment with peace education’s objectives. Religious Studies students may arrive at university with a higher baseline of tolerance formation and theological sensitivity, making them uniquely receptive to peace education literacies. Programs that necessarily include intergroup

relations, ethics, and social justice may provide a more fertile ground on which peace education can flourish and provide larger, quantifiable returns in tolerance.

Peace education as a pedagogic basis for empathy cultivation

Peace education is one of the important pedagogical instruments to develop empathy, which is a fundamental affective competence in promoting tolerance and social cohesiveness in diverse societies (Reardon 2002). Through involving learners in experiential, dialogical, and participatory approaches, peace education exceeds simple knowledge acquisition for the developmental process of emotive and moral development (Freire 1970; Sagkal 2012). These pedagogical strategies are specifically designed to foster empathic ability, which is defined as the ability to perceive and share the emotions of others, to elicit prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, altruism, and conflict resolution (Feshbach & Feshbach 2009; Dovidio et al. 2003).

Since peace education is designed to unite the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of human existence, it helps students to understand the other in an empathic manner and react compassionately when encountering pluralism (UNESCO 2005). This comprehensive development of peace literacies permits learners to actively engage and work towards the task of creating societal *shalom* and *Ihsan* (personal engagement in moral conduct), embodying human flourishing within the school and beyond.

Interpreting empathy in an interreligious context

The central finding of this study, that peace education, through especially the use of interactive and experiential pedagogies, has the most substantial predictive capacity on the empathy dimension of tolerance (R -squared = 0.547), deserves close theological and anthropological interpretation. This strong correlation indicates that when students are more actively engaged in processes that facilitate perspective-taking and affective resonance, the resulting change manifests most clearly as a developed capacity for empathy. Crucially, this empirical result provides a robust validation for the theoretical framework established in the literature review: namely, the concept that

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empathy serves as a virtue in honoring the *Imago Dei* and its parallel conceptions of human dignity in Islam.

From a Christian theological perspective, the most widely accepted interpretations of the *Imago Dei* are structural, that is to say, inherent rationality or moral capacity, functional, or humanity’s delegated role as God’s stewards over creation, and relational. It is the relational interpretation that most deeply intersects with the concept of empathy. If the Image of God is understood not merely as a trait a person possesses, but as a calling toward relationality, as a reflection of the Triune God’s communal nature, then our ethical obligation is to see and honor this image in the other.

Although *Imago Dei* is a term specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition, its ethical function nonetheless finds a deep parallel in the Islamic tradition relating to human dignity, or *karāmah*, and the doctrine of vicegerency, or *khalīfa*. This God-given honor, or *karāmah*, endows all human beings with a certain inviolable worth regardless of creed or social status. The concept of *khalīfa*, or vicegerent/steward, places humanity as God’s representative on earth, tasked with the maintenance of justice, the care of creation, and the flourishing of community. Empathy, in this context, becomes the indispensable moral tool by which that task is accomplished. Without the ability to feel the plight and understand the perspective of the other, a person cannot enact true justice or maintain communal cohesion. For that reason, the success of peace education in developing empathy among the students demonstrates that such pedagogical approaches have the effectiveness to develop the level of moral sensitivity. Empathy translates the abstract theological imperative to honor humanity into concrete, ethical action; it serves as the bridge between divine decree and lived experience.

The shared emphasis on inherent human dignity (*Imago Dei* and *karāmah*) across both Christian and Islamic traditions makes empathy the critical nexus for genuine interreligious peace education. The empirical findings in the study emphasize that through the focus on shared human experience serving as the common ground in which empathy is practiced, peace education indeed moves students beyond functional tolerance, characterized by ideas of fairness and reasonableness, to a more valuing position vis-à-vis the person.

This is the shift from functional tolerance to affective empathy that is essential. It ensures that peace is built not on pragmatic compromise but on a fundamental, theologically grounded conviction of shared, sacred human worth—in other words, the necessary foundation for relational human flourishing in a pluralistic Indonesian context.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how students' perceptions of peace education pedagogical methods relate to affective and cognitive dimensions of religious tolerance within Indonesian higher education. Utilizing a quantitative approach in both a Christian university, UKDW, and an Islamic one, UIN, all situated in Yogyakarta, the findings provide strong evidence with respect to the predictive capacity of peace education. The first conclusion established from the regression analysis is that peace education significantly predicts religious tolerance along its various dimensions. Crucially, its predictive relationship on the empathy dimension was the highest R-squared of 0.547, appreciably surpassing the predictive power on reasonableness and fairness dimensions with R-squared values of 0.481 and 0.297, respectively. This means that the experiential, interactive, and dialogical pedagogies employed in peace education possess a profound predictive capacity regarding relational change at an affective level, rather than merely predicting cognitive or functional compliance.

Theologically, this empirical outcome provides a powerful affirmation of the theoretical framework. The development of empathy is the practical, lived expression of honouring the inherent dignity of the human person. For Christians, this is rooted in the relational interpretation of the *Imago Dei* whereby seeing and valuing the other is an act of recognizing and affirming God's image in them, with movement toward shared peace and relational human flourishing. In Islam, this empathy-driven recognition fulfills the mandates of human dignity (*karāmah*) and vicegerency (*khalīfa*), assuring justice and communal cohesion in a way that bridges abstract theological honour with concrete ethical sensitivity. Empathy, therefore, stands as the

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critical interreligious virtue as the nexus through which shared human dignity is realized and protected in a pluralistic society.

While this study indeed provides evidence base for peace education, several limitations remain. The cross-sectional design will not allow causal inferences beyond students’ perceptions. Future research will need to adopt longitudinal studies or controlled trials to determine more precisely the longer-term predictive capacity and sustainability of these gains in empathy. Qualitative work that focuses on the lived experience of the students of these interactive pedagogies in understanding how their theological understanding of dignity shifts through empathetic engagement will situate these quantitative findings in a rich context.

6. Declarations

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Data availability statement

The survey data collected and analyzed in this study (N = 103) have limited demographic information and were provided by respondents who signed informed consent forms; therefore, the data are not publicly available to protect the respondents’ privacy. However, the corresponding author can provide anonymized data and the complete analysis results upon written request accompanied by a data-sharing agreement. Aggregate results and tables are available in this article.

Corresponding author: imanuelgeovasky@mail.ugm.ac.id

Declaration of interests statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval statement

All survey participants provided their informed consent for publication at the beginning of the survey. Their data were reported anonymously.

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6. Short biographies

Immanuel Geovasky is a doctoral student at the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). Ordained as a pastor in the Christian Church of Java, he holds a Master of Arts in Peace Studies from the Graduate School of Public Policy and Social Research, International Christian University, Tokyo, Japan, and a Bachelor of Theology from the Faculty of Theology, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His research interests focus on polarization, identity politics, religious tolerance, peace education, and peacebuilding. Email: immanuelgeovasky@mail.ugm.ac.id

Tabita Kartika Christiani earned her doctorate in Comparative Theology at Boston College, USA, in 2005. She is a Professor of Religious Education at the Faculty of Theology, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Her research interests include religious education, Christian education, and theology. She can be contacted at: tabita@staff.ukdw.ac.id

Dicky Sofjan is an Associate Professor in the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), based in the Universitas Gadjah Mada, Graduate School in Yogyakarta. His teaching and research interests include religion, politics, pluralism, religious freedom, ethics, and sustainability. Dr. Sofjan has received grants and worked with the US State Department, European Union, Ford Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, Globethics, Carnegie Council, Cordaid, Greenpeace Middle East and Africa (MENA), UNDP, International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), etc. He has been a member of the Educational Exchange Committee of the American-Indonesian Exchange Foundation (AMINEF/Fulbright) for more than 12 years. He is now Vice President of Globethics, an organization on

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ethics based in Geneva, Switzerland. He can be contacted at: dickysofjan@ugm.ac.id

Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf is a faculty member at the Center for Religious and Crosscultural Studies (CRCS), the Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada. He obtained his PhD from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in 2011 with a dissertation titled *From Revolution to Refolution: A Study of Hizb al-Tahrir, Its Changes and Trajectories in the Democratic Context of Indonesia (2000-2009)*. He can be contacted at: iqbal.ahnaf@ugm.ac.id