



INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS AND CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY: LESSONS FROM A SCHOOL VISIT PROGRAM IN MAKASSAR, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation and contribution of a cross-cultural school visit program to strengthening students' intercultural religious literacy at As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School in Makassar, Indonesia. The study responds to the persistence of social distance, stereotypes, and limited interaction between students from pesantren and students from other faith-based educational environments. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and reflective notes involving students and teacher mentors from both institutions. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with source triangulation used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. The findings show that the school visit program contributed positively to students' intercultural religious literacy in three dimensions. Cognitively, students gained a more concrete understanding of religious practices, learning cultures, and moral values in other institutions. Affectively, students developed empathy, openness, tolerance, and appreciation for difference. Socially, students showed greater confidence in cross-cultural communication and collaboration through dialogue, group reflection, and follow-up activities. This study contributes to Islamic Studies by demonstrating that cross-cultural religious literacy can be strengthened through educational practices rooted in the Islamic values of *ta'aruf*, *tasamuh*, *ukhuwwah insaniyah*, *Islam wasathiyah*, and *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. This is the Islamic educational for nurturing religious moderation and peaceful coexistence in Indonesia's plural society.

Keywords: Religious literacy; religious moderation; tolerance; Islamic education; intercultural education

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji implementasi dan kontribusi program kunjungan sekolah lintas budaya dalam memperkuat literasi keagamaan lintas budaya siswa di Pondok Pesantren As Shalihin dan Sekolah Elim Makassar, Indonesia. Penelitian ini berangkat dari masih adanya jarak sosial, stereotipe, dan keterbatasan interaksi antara siswa pesantren dan siswa dari lingkungan pendidikan berbasis agama yang berbeda. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dokumentasi, dan catatan reflektif yang melibatkan siswa serta guru pembimbing dari kedua lembaga. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahap reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, sedangkan keabsahan data diperkuat melalui triangulasi sumber. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program kunjungan sekolah berkontribusi positif terhadap penguatan literasi keagamaan lintas budaya siswa pada tiga dimensi. Pada dimensi kognitif, siswa memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih konkret tentang praktik keagamaan, budaya belajar, dan nilai moral di lembaga lain. Pada dimensi afektif, siswa menunjukkan peningkatan empati, keterbukaan, toleransi, dan penghargaan terhadap perbedaan. Pada dimensi sosial, siswa menjadi lebih percaya diri dalam berkomunikasi dan berkolaborasi lintas budaya melalui dialog, refleksi kelompok, dan kegiatan tindak lanjut. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian Islamic Studies dengan menunjukkan bahwa literasi keagamaan lintas budaya dapat diperkuat melalui praktik pendidikan yang berakar pada nilai *ta'aruf*, *tasamuh*, *ukhuwwah insaniyah*, *Islam wasathiyah*, dan *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.



Introduction

Indonesia is a multicultural country composed of diverse ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. This diversity is a social wealth, but it also presents challenges for education, especially when students have limited opportunities to meet peers from different religious and cultural environments. In school life, social and cultural distance may appear between students educated in pesantren and those educated in public or other faith-based schools. Some public school students may imagine pesantren as exclusive, highly regulated, or closed communities, while some pesantren students may view other schools as less attentive to religious discipline. These perceptions are not always based on direct experience; rather, they often emerge from limited interaction, inherited stereotypes, or a lack of structured spaces for dialogue.¹

The problem becomes more concrete in daily educational interactions. Students may hesitate to ask about religious symbols, worship practices, rules of dress, or learning routines because they fear offending others. Some students also show awkwardness when entering worship spaces outside their own tradition or when discussing religious celebrations, dietary rules, and devotional practices. Such hesitation indicates that religious literacy is not only a matter of knowing doctrines, but also of developing the social and ethical capacity to encounter difference respectfully. In the twenty-first century, the ability to communicate, collaborate, and build mutual understanding with people from different religious and cultural backgrounds has become an important educational competency.²

Previous studies have discussed religious literacy, tolerance, religious moderation, and multicultural education. Arif, for example, explains the importance of religious moderation in Islamic thought, while Yulianti and Ichsan emphasize character education and tolerance through school culture.³ Hobamatan highlights the role of

¹ A. Ramdan and M. Usman, "Pola Interaksi dan Komunikasi Kyai terhadap Santri di Pesantren Sirnarasa," *Iktisyaf: Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah dan Tasawuf* 3, no. 1 (2021): 56-85; A. Fauzi, "Interaksi Sosial dan Persepsi Siswa Sekolah Umum terhadap Pesantren di Indonesia," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 9, no. 2 (2021): 145-160.

² Dian Aswita et al., *Pendidikan Literasi: Memenuhi Kecakapan Abad 21* (Penerbit K-Media, 2022)

³ K. M. Arif, "Konsep Moderasi Islam dalam Pemikiran," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* (2020): 307-344; J. Yulianti and I. Ichsan, "Implementasi Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter melalui



Islamic Religious Education teachers in cultivating tolerance, guidance, and habits of respectful interaction among students.⁴ Other studies show that religious literacy can strengthen social skills such as empathy, cooperation, and openness to cultural diversity.⁵ These studies are important, but many of them still emphasize curricular instruction, classroom-based learning, or teacher-centered approaches. Less attention has been given to direct interreligious encounters as an experiential learning strategy in which students learn tolerance through face-to-face interaction with peers from different institutions.

This article addresses that gap by examining a school visit program between As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School in Makassar. The program is treated as an experiential learning practice in which students do not only hear about diversity but encounter it directly through observation, dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. Kolb's experiential learning theory explains that knowledge and attitude formation become stronger when learners pass through concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptual understanding, and active experimentation.⁶ Allport's intergroup contact theory further suggests that structured and positive contact between groups can reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding when it occurs under supportive conditions.⁷

In the context of Islamic Studies, this research is also connected to Islamic concepts of peaceful coexistence. The Qur'anic idea of ta'aruf emphasizes knowing one another across differences, while tasamuh refers to tolerance and willingness to respect others. The concept of ukhuwwah insaniyah affirms human brotherhood beyond religious boundaries, and Islam wasathiyah stresses moderation, balance, and avoidance of

Budaya Sekolah di SD Negeri 26 Dompu dan MI As-Salam Dompu," *Waniambey* 2, no. 2 (2021): 112-131

⁴ M. K. Hobamatan, *Peran Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Penguatan Nilai-Nilai Toleransi Beragama di Tengah Mayoritas Non-Muslim* (2022)

⁵ N. Nikmah, "Implementasi Literasi Agama untuk Meningkatkan Keterampilan Sosial pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar," *Edusiana: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 1, no. 2 (2023); M. A. Nasution et al., "Pendampingan Literasi Agama pada Peserta Didik di SMPN 02 Panyabungan dalam Memperkuat Pendidikan Multikultural," *Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat: Pemberdayaan, Inovasi dan Perubahan* 5, no. 2 (2025)

⁶ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (FT Press, 2014)

⁷ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954)



extremism. These values are aligned with the broader Islamic vision of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, namely Islam as mercy for all creation.⁸ Therefore, the school visit program is not merely an intercultural education activity; it is also an educational practice that can enrich Islamic Studies by demonstrating how Islamic values of moderation and compassion may be lived in plural social settings.

Based on this background, this study asks: how does the school visit program between As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School Makassar contribute to strengthening students' cross-cultural religious literacy? The study aims to describe the implementation of the program, identify students' responses and behavioral changes, analyze the challenges encountered, and explain its relevance for Islamic education and religious moderation in Indonesia.

This study used a qualitative case study approach. The case study design was selected because the research focused on one specific educational program implemented in two specific institutions: As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School Makassar. A case study is appropriate for examining a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the program, the participants, and the institutional setting are closely connected.⁹ This approach is more suitable than a general descriptive qualitative design because the object of inquiry is not a broad phenomenon, but a bounded program involving particular actors, places, and activities.

The research was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and reflective notes. Observation was used to record the stages of preparation, visit activities, student interaction, dialogue, and reflection sessions. Interviews were conducted with students and teacher mentors from both institutions to understand their experiences before, during, and after the visit. The student interview data quoted in this article include four student informants from the two institutions: Jayzan and Jessica Rumia from Elim School, and Warman Nurhidayah and

⁸ Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Kemenag RI, 2019); M. Saihu, "Moderasi Pendidikan: Sebuah Sarana Membumikan Toleransi dalam Dunia Pendidikan," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 02 (2022): 629-648

⁹ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2017); K. Y. Robert, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (2018)



Neneng Oktavyany from As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School. Teacher mentors from both institutions were also involved as contextual informants because they facilitated preparation, guided student reflection, and explained the aims and challenges of the program.

Documentation included visit agendas, school activity notes, photographs, and student reflection records. These documents were used to complement observation and interview data. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.¹⁰ Data reduction was conducted by selecting information related to program implementation, student responses, changes in attitude, and obstacles. Data display was carried out by grouping findings into cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of cross-cultural religious literacy. Conclusion drawing was conducted by comparing patterns across interviews, observations, and documents. Source triangulation was used to strengthen the validity of the findings by comparing student statements, teacher explanations, and field observations.¹¹

Results

Implementation of the School Visit Program

The cross-cultural school visit program between As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School Makassar was implemented through four stages: preparation, visit, reflection, and follow-up. These stages show that the program was not designed as a ceremonial visit, but as a structured learning process intended to create safe and meaningful interaction among students.

The first stage was preparation. Teachers and facilitators from both institutions discussed the visit agenda, the ethical rules of interaction, and the types of learning activities that students would follow. Students were introduced to basic principles of respectful dialogue, including how to ask questions about religious practices politely,

¹⁰ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014).

¹¹ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985).



how to avoid mocking unfamiliar customs, and how to listen without immediately judging. This stage was important because several students initially expressed hesitation about entering an unfamiliar school environment and interacting with peers from a different religious background.

The second stage was the school visit. Students from As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School visited Elim School, while students from Elim School visited the pesantren. The activities included observing classrooms, learning spaces, worship facilities, libraries, and school routines. Students also participated in group dialogue, shared stories about their learning habits, and discussed moral values practiced in their respective institutions. Field observations showed that students who were initially quiet began to ask questions about daily worship routines, study schedules, discipline, social service activities, and the meaning of religious symbols in the school environment.

Concrete examples of learning emerged during the visit. Some Elim School students were surprised to learn that pesantren students followed structured evening study and religious learning routines. Conversely, some pesantren students discovered that Elim School encouraged cooperation, creativity, and social service as part of its educational culture. Before the visit, several students associated the other institution mainly with religious difference; after the visit, they began to recognize shared values such as discipline, service, mutual help, and respect for teachers.

The third stage was reflection. Students wrote and discussed what they learned from the visit, how they felt when entering a different educational and religious environment, and what assumptions had changed. Reflection sessions revealed that students did not only gain factual information, but also processed emotional experiences such as nervousness, curiosity, surprise, and comfort. This stage helped students identify differences between earlier assumptions and actual encounters.

The fourth stage was follow-up. Teachers encouraged students to maintain communication through discussion forums, social projects, and the exchange of learning experiences. Although follow-up activities were not always conducted regularly because of schedule differences and limited resources, some students showed initiative to continue communication beyond the formal program. This included informal discussions, planning social activities, and maintaining contact with peers from the other institution.



Figure 1. Implementation of the School Visit Program

Contributions to Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy

The findings show that the school visit program contributed to strengthening students' cross-cultural religious literacy in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and social. These findings are presented here as field data, while theoretical interpretation is discussed in the next section.

1. Cognitive Dimension

In the cognitive dimension, students gained a more concrete understanding of religious and cultural practices in another educational institution. Elim School students learned that pesantren life is not only about strict rules, but also about discipline, independence, memorization, worship, and collective responsibility. Pesantren students learned that Elim School is not only a non-pesantren environment, but also an institution that emphasizes cooperation, creativity, service, and moral formation.

The visit also encouraged students to compare their earlier assumptions with what they directly observed. Before the visit, some students had limited information about the other institution and relied on general impressions. After observing classrooms, worship spaces, and student routines, they were able to explain differences more accurately and identify shared values. For example, discipline in the pesantren and



cooperation in Elim School were understood not as contradictory practices, but as different expressions of moral education.

2. Affective Dimension

In the affective dimension, students reported changes in feelings and attitudes toward peers from different religious backgrounds. Before the visit, some students felt awkward, worried, or unsure about how to behave. After the visit, several students described feeling more comfortable, open, and willing to engage in conversation.

Jayzan, a student from Elim School, stated: "I feel happy because I can meet friends from outside the church who have different beliefs than me. Even though we are different, those differences do not prevent us from interacting and exchanging ideas."¹² This statement shows that the visit helped students experience difference as an opportunity for interaction rather than a barrier.

Warman Nurhidayah, a student from As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School, explained: "When I first set foot in the church, I was very worried, afraid they would not welcome us. However, after interacting with the Elim School students, my previous suspicion changed completely. They were very polite to us and invited us to talk."¹³ This quotation gives a concrete example of how direct encounter changed a student's emotional response from anxiety to trust.

3. Social Dimension

In the social dimension, students became more confident in communicating and collaborating with peers from different backgrounds. Group discussions, shared reflection, and collaborative activities trained students to listen, ask questions, and respond respectfully. The program also encouraged students to recognize that cooperation is possible even when religious identities differ.

Some students showed behavioral changes after the program. They became more willing to greet peers from the other institution, ask questions without fear, and participate in joint activities. Neneng Oktavyany, a student from As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School, stated: "I now understand my friends from Elim School better; it

¹² Jayzan, Elim School Student, interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05.

¹³ Warman Nurhidayah, As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School Student, interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05.



turns out we share many similarities in social values and cooperation.”¹⁴ Jessica Rumia from Elim School similarly said: “Now I am more confident in discussions with my friends from the Islamic Boarding School, and I have learned to respect their perspectives.”¹⁵

These statements indicate that the program contributed not only to knowledge about other groups, but also to practical communication skills and willingness to maintain social relations across institutional and religious boundaries.

Challenges and Obstacles

The study found several challenges in implementing the program. First, cultural and customary differences caused some students to feel awkward at the beginning of the visit. This was especially visible when students entered unfamiliar worship spaces or encountered different rules of dress and behavior. Second, differences in school schedules and learning systems limited the duration of observation and dialogue. The pesantren routine and the school routine did not always align, making it difficult to arrange longer activities. Third, follow-up activities were not always sustainable because they depended on available time, teacher coordination, and institutional support. Fourth, teacher mentors still needed additional training in facilitating interfaith dialogue, guiding reflection, and managing subtle discomfort that may arise during cross-cultural encounters.

Discussion

The findings show that the school visit program strengthened cross-cultural religious literacy by combining direct encounter, guided reflection, and follow-up interaction. The program was more effective than theoretical tolerance learning because students did not only receive messages about respecting difference; they practiced respect in real situations. Classroom instruction may explain the importance of tolerance, but face-to-face visits allow students to experience the emotions, questions,

¹⁴ Neneng Oktavyany, As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School Student, interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05.

¹⁵ Jessica Rumia, Elim School Student, interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05.



and adjustments involved in meeting others. This explains why several students reported a shift from anxiety or suspicion to comfort and openness after the visit.

From the perspective of Kolb's experiential learning theory, the program followed a learning cycle. The visit functioned as a concrete experience because students directly observed and interacted with a different educational environment. Reflection sessions allowed students to process what they saw and felt. Through discussion, students developed new concepts about religious difference, shared moral values, and respectful communication. Follow-up activities then created opportunities for active experimentation, in which students applied their new understanding through continued interaction and collaboration.¹⁶

Allport's intergroup contact theory also helps explain the reduction of prejudice observed in the data. Positive contact can reduce stereotypes when it occurs under supportive conditions, includes meaningful interaction, and is guided by shared goals.¹⁷ In this program, teachers created a structured environment, students interacted through dialogue and observation, and both groups were encouraged to recognize common educational and moral values. Warman's statement about moving from fear to feeling welcomed illustrates how direct contact can correct inaccurate assumptions.

The findings also confirm the relevance of cross-cultural religious literacy as described by Halafoff and Jackson. Religious literacy in a plural society is not limited to factual knowledge about religion; it also includes the ability to understand religious life in cultural context, communicate across difference, and participate respectfully in diverse public spaces.¹⁸ The cognitive dimension appeared when students learned about worship routines, institutional cultures, and moral values. The affective dimension appeared when students developed empathy and comfort. The social dimension appeared when students became more confident in discussion and cooperation.

However, this article also argues that the program must be understood within Islamic Studies, not only through Western educational theories. The school visit

¹⁶ Kolb, *Experiential Learning*.

¹⁷ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*.

¹⁸ Anna Halafoff, "The Multifaith Movement, Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions," in *The Multifaith Movement: Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions* (Springer, 2012), 1-8; Robert Jackson, *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (Council of Europe, 2014).



program embodies the Islamic value of ta'aruf, because students were invited to know one another across religious and cultural boundaries. Ta'aruf does not mean erasing difference, but recognizing others with dignity. The program also reflects tasamuh, because students practiced tolerance not as passive acceptance, but as active respect during conversation, observation, and shared learning. In addition, the program strengthened ukhuwwah insaniyah, because students discovered common human values such as kindness, cooperation, discipline, and service despite differences in faith tradition.

The program is also relevant to Islam wasathiyah and religious moderation. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs explains religious moderation as a way of practicing religion that avoids extremism, respects national commitment, rejects violence, and appreciates local culture.¹⁹ In this study, moderation was not taught only as a concept; it was embodied through student interaction. Pesantren students learned to meet others without losing their Islamic identity, while Elim School students learned to appreciate Islamic educational practices without reducing their own identity. This mutual recognition represents an educational expression of rahmatan lil 'alamin, because religious learning becomes a source of mercy, peace, and social harmony.

The findings have several implications. First, school visit programs need policy support so that they do not remain incidental activities. Second, cross-cultural visits should be integrated into Religious Education, Pancasila Education, and religious moderation programs. Third, teacher capacity building is necessary because teachers are not only organizers but also facilitators of sensitive dialogue. Fourth, follow-up activities should be planned from the beginning so that the visit produces sustainable relationships rather than one-time impressions.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted carefully. Because this is qualitative research, the study does not claim to measure statistically significant improvement or academic achievement. Rather, it shows observable changes, student narratives, and program contributions to students' cross-cultural religious literacy. Future research using quantitative or mixed methods may measure the level and durability of these changes more objectively.

¹⁹ Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, Moderasi Beragama.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the cross-cultural school visit program between As Shalihin Islamic Boarding School and Elim School Makassar contributed positively to strengthening students' cross-cultural religious literacy. Through direct interaction, observation, dialogue, and reflection, students gained meaningful experiences that helped them understand difference more concretely and relate to peers from other religious backgrounds more respectfully.

In the cognitive dimension, students developed a broader understanding of religious practices, educational cultures, moral values, and daily routines in another institution. In the affective dimension, students showed greater empathy, openness, comfort, and appreciation for difference. In the social dimension, students became more confident in communicating, discussing, and collaborating across institutional and religious boundaries. The student interviews show that the program helped reduce initial awkwardness and encouraged more respectful interaction.

The study contributes to Islamic Studies by showing that cross-cultural religious literacy can be cultivated through educational practices rooted in Islamic values such as ta'aruf, tasamuh, ukhuwwah insaniyah, Islam wasathiyah, and rahmatan lil 'alamin. These concepts demonstrate that interfaith encounter is not external to Islamic education, but can become part of a transformative Islamic pedagogy that nurtures moderation, compassion, and peaceful coexistence.

The program still faces several challenges, including limited time, different learning systems, uneven follow-up, and the need for teacher training in facilitating interfaith dialogue. Therefore, future implementation should be more structured, supported by institutional policy, and integrated into relevant curricula. Further research may expand the number of institutions, use mixed methods, and examine the long-term effects of school visit programs on students' religious attitudes, social behavior, and interfaith cooperation.

Recommendations

Educational institutions should make cross-cultural visit programs part of continuous learning rather than occasional ceremonial activities. The program should be planned systematically and connected to Religious Education, Pancasila Education,



and religious moderation curricula. Schools also need to establish cross-institutional communication forums to support follow-up activities such as joint social projects, interfaith dialogue, and cultural exchange.

Government and education policymakers should provide guidelines, funding support, and teacher training programs for strengthening cross-cultural religious literacy. Such support can help schools design safe, structured, and pedagogically meaningful encounters among students from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Teachers and mentors should strengthen their pedagogical and social competencies as facilitators of dialogue. They need to guide students before, during, and after visits, especially when students encounter unfamiliar practices or express discomfort. Reflection should be continued in classroom learning so that the values gained from the visit become part of students' character formation.

Future researchers may develop broader studies using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure the effectiveness of school visit programs more objectively. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether changes in students' attitudes and social behavior are sustained over time.

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Interview:

Jayzan (Elim School Student) , interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05

Warman Nurhidayah (As-shalihin Islamic Boarding School Student) , interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05

Neneng Oktavyany (As-shalihin Islamic Boarding School Student) , interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05

Jessica rumia (Elim School Student) , interview, Thursday, 23 October 2025, at 09.05