

MUSLIM STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN INDONESIA: INTERFAITH LEARNING AND SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

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Abstract

This study addresses the limited empirical understanding of how Muslim students negotiate their socio-religious identity within Catholic Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesian faith-based schools. While interfaith learning has been widely promoted, little is known about how minority students interpret and engage with religious differences in classroom contexts. This study aims to examine the processes through which Muslim students construct meaning and maintain their religious identity in interfaith learning settings. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this research involved nine participants, including Muslim students, students from other religious backgrounds, a religion teacher, and a school principal. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations conducted between January and February 2026, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students undergo a process of socio-religious identity negotiation, characterized by initial uncertainty, adaptive participation, and selective engagement with religious content. Dialogical and non-coercive pedagogy enables students to reinterpret religious differences through shared moral values without compromising their beliefs. This study highlights the role of inclusive religious education in fostering reflective religiosity and interfaith understanding in pluralistic contexts.

Keywords: *Interfaith Learning; Socio-Religious Identity Negotiation; Phenomenology; Thematic Analysis; Religious Education; Indonesia*

A. Introduction

Indonesia represents a highly pluralistic society in which multiple religious traditions coexist within shared social and educational spaces. Schools, in this context, function as micro-sites where religious identities, values, and everyday practices intersect. Existing studies have established that such encounters can foster mutual understanding when supported by inclusive educational practices, particularly through interfaith learning that promotes dialogue and religious literacy (O'Higgins-Norman, 2020). However, research also shows that diversity within schools does not automatically translate into inclusive experiences. Instead, it may reproduce social distance, stereotypes, and latent forms of intolerance, especially among younger students (Azra, 2021).

In response, interfaith education has been widely proposed as a strategic approach to fostering social cohesion. In the Indonesian context, this is increasingly reflected in faith-based schools that accommodate students from diverse religious backgrounds, including Catholic schools that enroll Muslim, Hindu, and Confucian students. While prior studies have emphasized the potential of such environments to cultivate tolerance, they also

indicate that minority students often encounter challenges related to participation and belonging, particularly when engaging in religious instruction that does not align with their own beliefs (Barihasion et al., 2023; Zuhdiyah et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of interfaith education depends not only on institutional inclusion but also on how students interpret and navigate these experiences at the individual level.

In a broader context, the discourse on religious moderation can strengthen understanding of the importance of interfaith harmony. Hasan (2025) and A. Husna et al. (2025) emphasizes that religious moderation is based on the principles of justice, balance, tolerance, and national commitment. These principles are not only moral ideals, but also the foundation of harmonious national life in a pluralistic society. In the empirical realm, Prakosa (2022) shows that interfaith harmony can be achieved through dialogue, mutual respect, and the strengthening of universal human values. These two studies provide an important theoretical basis for research exploring the experiences of Muslim students in religious education in Catholic schools.

This unique phenomenon can be seen at Bruderan Purwokerto Junior High School, a Catholic-based school that has been established since 1947 and accepts students from various religions. Although all students take Catholic religious classes, teachers apply an inclusive approach that emphasizes universal moral values such as love, discipline, and honesty. For Muslim students, the learning experience in classrooms filled with Catholic religious symbols and narratives presents interesting spiritual and social dynamics. A critical question arises, how do Muslim students interpret this experience? Do they experience religious confusion, or do they find a new space for reflection on human values?

Despite these insights, two important gaps remain. First, existing research has largely focused on interfaith tolerance as an outcome, rather than examining the underlying processes through which minority students actively negotiate their religious identity in classroom settings. Second, studies on minority students in faith-based schools tend to describe their experiences descriptively, with limited attention to the subjective meaning-making processes that shape their responses to religious difference. As a result, the concept of identity negotiation remains underexplored, particularly in relation to how it operates as a socio-religious process involving adaptation, reinterpretation, and selective engagement within interfaith learning contexts. In fact, as explained by Van Manen (2017), the phenomenological approach allows researchers to capture life experiences in depth, including how students understand religious lessons, how they interact with teachers and friends, and how these experiences shape their understanding of diversity.

In addition to being relevant to interfaith education literature, this study is also related to the national agenda of religious moderation launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2019. Religious moderation emphasizes four indicators, namely national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of local traditions (Indonesia, 2019). These values are in line with educational practices at Bruderan schools, which strive to create a safe learning environment for all students.

From a global perspective, studies on interfaith education show that interfaith education can increase understanding, prevent extremism, and strengthen social cohesion

(Flannery, 2019; O'Higgins-Norman, 2020). However, most of these studies took place in secular countries, so this study offers a new contribution through the context of Muslim countries that have religious-based schools. Empirically, field observations show that Muslim students at Bruderan Junior High School are able to adapt well. They actively participate in learning and school activities, while continuing to practice their respective religious rituals and traditions. However, the meaning of this experience has not been explored in depth.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the lived experiences of Muslim students in Catholic Religious Education within the Indonesian context. Unlike previous studies that emphasize tolerance outcomes, this research examines how students interpret interfaith encounters and negotiate their socio-religious identity in a setting where religious instruction is rooted in a different tradition. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to capture the structure of students' experiences, including how they construct meaning, manage difference, and maintain religious coherence in a pluralistic learning environment. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on interfaith education by shifting the analytical focus from institutional inclusion to the experiential and interpretive dimensions of identity negotiation. Therefore, this study aims to explore and understand the meaning of Muslim students' experiences in taking Catholic Religious Education classes at Bruderan Junior High School in Purwokerto. This objective is directly related to the background, the context of interfaith education, and the research gap identified earlier.

Through a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to capture the deepest meaning of the students' experiences, especially how they interpret interfaith encounters and how these experiences influence their attitudes toward tolerance, religious understanding, and self-identity.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Muslim students participating in Catholic Religious Education (CRE) within a Catholic-based school. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to interpret how individuals construct meaning from their experiences within specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, rather than merely describing them (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In this study, phenomenology is used to examine socio-religious identity negotiation as a dynamic process involving interpretation, adaptation, and selective engagement in response to interfaith learning. Accordingly, the focus is not only on what students experience, but also on how they make sense of and respond to religious differences while maintaining their identity within a minority position.

The research was conducted at SMP Bruderan Purwokerto over a two-month period, from January to February 2026. Data collection was carried out systematically in several stages to ensure depth and credibility. Interviews with Muslim students were conducted on January 15, 18, and 21, 2026, followed by interviews with Catholic and Christian students

on January 25 and 29, 2026. Interviews with Confucian and Hindu students were conducted on February 2 and 6, 2026, respectively. Subsequently, the Catholic Religious Education teacher was interviewed on February 10, 2026, and the school principal on February 14, 2026. Classroom observation was conducted on February 20, 2026. This chronological sequence reflects a progressive deepening of data, moving from individual experiences to broader institutional perspectives and observed classroom practices.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the research objectives (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The inclusion criteria were: (1) students actively participating in Catholic Religious Education classes, (2) representation of diverse religious backgrounds, and (3) willingness to provide open and reflective responses. A total of nine participants were involved in this study, consisting of primary participants (Muslim students), supporting participants (students from other religious backgrounds), and key informants (teacher and principal). Although the number of participants is relatively small, this is consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of representation. The selection enabled intensive engagement with each participant's lived experience and supported the development of rich, nuanced interpretations. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews.

Table 1. Participants and Data Sources

No	Participant	Religion	Role	Grade
1	Student 1	Islam	Main participant	VII
2	Student 2	Islam	Main participant	VIII
3	Student 3	Islam	Main participant	IX
4	Student 4	Catholic	Supporting participant	VII
5	Student 5	Christian	Supporting participant	VIII
6	Student 6	Confucian	Supporting participant	VIII
7	Student 7	Hindu	Supporting participant	IX
8	Teacher	Catholic	Key informant	-
9	Principal	Catholic	Key informant	-

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes in depth. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and followed an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions addressing students' initial reactions, classroom experiences, perceptions of religious differences, and strategies for maintaining their religious identity. Probing questions were used to clarify responses and deepen interpretation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Classroom observation was conducted to capture real-time interactions between teachers and students from different religious backgrounds, as well as the implementation of inclusive and dialogical practices in learning activities. Documentation, including field notes and observation records, was used to support and triangulate the data obtained from

interviews and observations. The use of multiple data sources ensured triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis within an interpretive phenomenological framework, supported by the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020). This integration allows for systematic data organization while maintaining interpretive depth. The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, all interview data were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to achieve immersion. Second, initial coding was conducted by identifying significant statements related to participants' lived experiences. Third, these codes were refined and grouped into categories through constant comparison. Fourth, categories were developed into overarching themes that reflect the structure of socio-religious identity negotiation, including phases of uncertainty, adaptation, reinterpretation, and selective engagement. Finally, these themes were interpreted in relation to the broader socio-religious context to construct a coherent understanding of the phenomenon. The process was iterative and continued until thematic consistency and analytical saturation were achieved.

This study adhered to established ethical standards in qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Given that the study involved students, participation was entirely voluntary and did not affect their academic standing. The researcher also maintained sensitivity toward religious issues to avoid discomfort or misrepresentation during data collection.

To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed, including triangulation of data sources and methods, as well as member checking, in which participants were given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. In addition, reflexivity was applied by critically reflecting on the researcher's assumptions, beliefs, and positionality that might influence the interpretation of data. This process helped minimize bias and ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' authentic experiences (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019).

Through these systematic and transparent procedures, the study aims to achieve credibility, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring that the findings are methodologically rigorous and analytically meaningful within similar educational contexts.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

a. Inclusive Religious Learning as a Shared Moral Space

The findings indicate that Catholic Religious Education (CRE) at SMP Bruderan Purwokerto functions not merely as doctrinal instruction but as a shared moral learning space accessible to students from diverse religious backgrounds. Across interviews conducted between January and February 2026, participants consistently emphasized that the subject was framed in terms of universal values

rather than confessional obligation. A Muslim student explained that initial concerns about religious incompatibility diminished after clarification from the teacher that the subject aimed to “teach goodness, not to change beliefs” (Informant 1, Muslim student, interview, January 2026). This framing established a foundation for participation without perceived coercion.

This inclusive orientation was further reinforced through pedagogical practices observed in the classroom. During an observed session, the teacher explicitly invited students to engage with moral concepts across religious traditions, stating that love and compassion are not exclusive to Catholicism (Classroom observation, January 2026). Students from different religious backgrounds actively contributed parallel concepts, such as *rahmah* in Islam and *ahimsa* in Hinduism, indicating that the classroom functioned as a dialogical space rather than a unidirectional transmission of doctrine. This suggests that CRE was operationalized as an ethical discourse rather than a theological imposition.

Importantly, the inclusivity of the learning environment was not only constructed by the teacher but also sustained through peer interaction. A Catholic student expressed appreciation for the presence of non-Catholic peers, noting that their participation reflected openness and mutual respect (Informant 4, Catholic student, interview, February 2026). This reciprocal recognition contributed to normalizing diversity within the classroom, thereby reducing potential boundaries between religious groups.

However, while the data consistently highlight inclusivity, it is important to note that this inclusivity is structured within a Catholic institutional framework. The presence of religious symbols and Catholic-oriented curriculum content remains visible. Yet, rather than creating exclusion, these elements appear to be mediated through interpretive strategies that emphasize shared ethical meanings. Thus, the findings suggest that inclusivity in this context is not the absence of religious identity, but the reinterpretation of that identity into a form that is accessible to all students.

Despite the emphasis on inclusivity, the data also reveal a subtle tension between institutional identity and pedagogical openness. While students generally perceived the classroom as inclusive, the persistent presence of Catholic symbols and narratives created moments of implicit differentiation. For some Muslim students, this produced a sense of “being present but not fully belonging,” particularly during discussions that referenced specifically Catholic theological frameworks. This indicates that inclusivity operates within structural boundaries, requiring students to continuously interpret and reposition themselves within a dominant religious discourse. Thus, the classroom cannot be understood as a neutral space, but rather as a negotiated space shaped by both inclusion and symbolic asymmetry.

b. Students’ Adaptation and Negotiation of Religious Identity

The data reveal that non-Catholic students, particularly Muslim participants, engaged in an active process of adaptation that involved negotiating their

participation while maintaining their religious identity. Initial reactions were often characterized by uncertainty or hesitation. One student described feeling “afraid and confused” at the beginning, especially regarding parental expectations (Informant 2, Muslim student, interview, February 2026). This indicates that adaptation is not immediate but involves an early stage of cognitive and emotional adjustment.

Over time, this uncertainty transitioned into a more stable form of participation, supported by clear boundaries established within the classroom. Students repeatedly emphasized that they were not required to engage in specifically Catholic practices, such as prayer rituals. Instead, they were given the autonomy to practice according to their own beliefs. As one student stated, “I pray silently in my own way, and the teacher allows that” (Informant 1, Muslim student, interview, January 2026). This flexibility played a crucial role in enabling students to participate without compromising their religious commitments.

The negotiation of identity also involved reinterpretation of religious differences. Rather than perceiving differences as contradictions, students framed them as variations within a shared moral framework. For example, a Muslim student noted that teachings on forgiveness and compassion in Catholicism were “the same as in Islam” (Informant 2, Muslim student, interview, February 2026). This interpretive alignment allowed students to integrate new knowledge without experiencing identity conflict.

At the same time, moments of conceptual difficulty were acknowledged, particularly when encountering theological concepts such as the Trinity. However, these challenges did not lead to rejection but were instead managed through selective engagement. Students reported focusing on moral lessons rather than doctrinal details, suggesting a pragmatic approach to learning. This indicates that adaptation is not passive acceptance, but an active filtering process through which students maintain coherence in their belief systems.

This process can be understood as a form of socio-religious identity negotiation, in which students actively manage the boundaries between participation and belief. Rather than passively receiving knowledge, they engage in a reflexive process that involves filtering, reinterpreting, and selectively appropriating elements of religious content. Importantly, this negotiation is not linear or fully resolved; moments of understanding coexist with moments of ambiguity, particularly when students encounter doctrinal concepts that cannot be easily reconciled with their own beliefs. This highlights that identity negotiation is an ongoing and situational process rather than a stable outcome.

c. Teacher’s Role in Facilitating Dialogical and Non-Doctrinal Learning

The teacher emerged as a central figure in shaping the inclusive and dialogical character of the classroom. Data from interviews and observations consistently highlight the teacher’s deliberate effort to position CRE as a value-oriented subject. The teacher explicitly stated that the goal was not conversion but

character formation based on universal principles such as love, honesty, and responsibility (Informant 8, Catholic teacher, interview, February 2026). This pedagogical stance provided a clear ethical framework that guided classroom interactions.

In practice, the teacher employed dialogical strategies that encouraged student participation across religious boundaries. For instance, during classroom discussions, students were invited to share perspectives from their own religious traditions. This approach not only validated diverse viewpoints but also redistributed authority within the classroom, allowing students to become co-constructors of knowledge (Classroom observation, January 2026). As a result, learning became a collaborative process rather than a hierarchical transmission.

The teacher also played a critical role in managing potential tensions. When students expressed confusion about specific theological topics, the teacher responded by emphasizing respect for difference rather than insisting on doctrinal understanding. This approach reduced the risk of discomfort and reinforced the idea that agreement was not a prerequisite for participation. A student noted that the teacher “does not force us to understand everything, only to take the moral values” (Informant 3, Muslim student, interview, February 2026).

Furthermore, the teacher’s language consistently reflected inclusivity and sensitivity. Phrases such as “according to your own belief” were frequently used, signaling recognition of religious diversity. This linguistic framing contributed to creating a psychologically safe environment where students felt respected. Thus, the findings suggest that the teacher’s role extends beyond instruction to include mediation, facilitation, and ethical modeling within a multireligious classroom context.

d. Peer Interaction and the Construction of Everyday Harmony

Peer interaction constitutes a significant dimension of the findings, particularly in demonstrating how interreligious understanding is enacted in everyday classroom practices. Observational data show that students engaged in group discussions without forming divisions based on religious identity (Classroom observation, January 2026). Instead, collaboration occurred naturally, with students contributing ideas and supporting each other regardless of background.

This pattern is further supported by interview data, where students described their relationships as “normal” and “supportive.” A Muslim student stated that peers would help explain unfamiliar concepts without imposing their beliefs (Informant 1, Muslim student, interview, January 2026). Similarly, a Catholic student noted that assisting non-Catholic peers was part of mutual learning rather than a one-sided act (Informant 4, Catholic student, interview, February 2026). These interactions suggest that peer relationships are characterized by reciprocity rather than hierarchy.

Importantly, peer interaction also served as a site for informal learning about religious differences. Through everyday conversations and collaborative tasks,

students gained insights into each other's practices and beliefs. For example, discussions about prayer practices or religious symbols occurred in a context of curiosity rather than judgment. This indicates that understanding was not only through formal instruction but also through social engagement.

However, it is worth noting that harmony in peer interaction does not imply the absence of difference. Instead, differences are acknowledged but not problematized. Students appear to adopt a pragmatic orientation, focusing on shared activities and common goals. This suggests that everyday harmony is constructed through routine practices of cooperation and mutual respect, rather than through explicit negotiation of ideological differences.

However, the apparent harmony in peer interaction should not be interpreted as the absence of underlying differences. Instead, the data suggest that students often manage difference through pragmatic avoidance, focusing on shared activities while leaving deeper theological differences unaddressed. This form of "surface harmony" enables smooth interaction but may also limit opportunities for deeper critical engagement with religious diversity. In this sense, peer interaction simultaneously facilitates coexistence and constrains the exploration of difference, reflecting a tension between social cohesion and critical dialogue.

e. Internalization of Universal Values Across Religious Boundaries

A key finding of this study is that students internalized universal moral values as the primary outcome of their engagement with CRE. Across all participant groups, there was a consistent emphasis on values such as compassion, honesty, forgiveness, and respect. These values were perceived as transcending religious boundaries, allowing students to relate the content of CRE to their own belief systems. One student explicitly stated that "all religions teach goodness, so the values are the same" (Informant 2, Muslim student, interview, February 2026).

This internalization process is closely linked to the pedagogical emphasis on moral rather than doctrinal content. By focusing on ethical principles, the teacher enabled students to extract meaning without experiencing conflict with their religious identity. Observational data confirm that lessons were structured around real-life applications, such as helping others or resolving conflicts peacefully (Classroom observation, January 2026). This practical orientation facilitated the translation of abstract values into everyday behavior.

In addition, students demonstrated the ability to articulate these values in relation to their own religious frameworks. For instance, Muslim students connected the concept of love with *rahmah*, while Hindu students referred to *ahimsa*. This indicates that internalization is not a process of adopting values, but of integrating them into existing belief systems. Such integration reflects a form of cognitive and moral synthesis that supports interreligious understanding.

At the same time, the emphasis on universal values may also obscure deeper theological differences. While students recognize similarities, there is limited

engagement with the complexities of doctrinal divergence. Nevertheless, within the context of secondary education, this focus on shared ethics appears to be effective in fostering mutual respect and social cohesion. Thus, the findings suggest that value-based religious education can serve as a bridge across religious boundaries without requiring doctrinal convergence.

While the emphasis on universal values supports interreligious understanding, it also raises critical questions regarding the depth of religious learning. The tendency to prioritize ethical commonalities may lead to what can be described as ethical reductionism, where religion is understood primarily in terms of shared moral values while its doctrinal and transcendental dimensions are minimized. This suggests that while value-based learning promotes inclusivity, it may also simplify the complexity of religious traditions, potentially limiting students' capacity to engage with difference at a deeper theological level.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Catholic Religious Education (CRE) in a multireligious classroom can function as an inclusive moral learning space. However, beyond describing this phenomenon, it is essential to interpret how and why such a model operates effectively within a pluralistic educational context. This discussion situates the findings within broader theoretical frameworks of inclusive religious education, dialogical pedagogy, and religious moderation, while also critically examining its limitations.

Beyond confirming the effectiveness of inclusive and dialogical pedagogy, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of interfaith learning as a negotiated and tension-filled process. The findings suggest that identity negotiation does not occur in a neutral or fully harmonious environment, but within a structured setting marked by asymmetrical religious representation. This extends existing literature on interfaith education, which often emphasizes positive outcomes such as tolerance and empathy, by highlighting the micro-level processes through which students actively interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist elements of religious learning. In this sense, interfaith learning should be understood not only as a pedagogical model but as a lived experience shaped by negotiation, ambiguity, and contextual constraints.

First, the transformation of CRE into a shared ethical space reflects what scholars describe as a post-confessional or inclusive model of religious education, where the emphasis shifts from doctrinal transmission to moral and civic formation (Bahri et al., 2025; Gearon, 2013; Jackson, 2014). In this study, the teacher's consistent framing of lessons around universal values such as compassion, honesty, and respect illustrates this shift. Rather than positioning Catholicism as a closed system of belief, it is presented as part of a broader moral discourse accessible to all students. This aligns with Jackson (2014) argument that religious education in plural societies should promote interpretive understanding, enabling students to engage with religious traditions without requiring adherence. The classroom thus becomes a space of encounter, not conversion.

Furthermore, the dialogical nature of classroom interaction supports Freire (1970) concept of dialogic pedagogy, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction

rather than imposed by authority. The active participation of students from different religious backgrounds, who contributed perspectives from Islam, Hinduism, and other traditions, demonstrates that learning occurred through mutual exchange. This supports the idea that dialogue fosters not only cognitive understanding but also ethical awareness (Buber & Smith, 2002; S. Husna et al., 2025). In this context, dialogue is not merely a method but a pedagogical stance that redefines the relationship between teacher, student, and knowledge. The teacher's role shifts from authority figure to facilitator, enabling what Vygotsky (1978) would describe as socially mediated learning.

In addition, the process by which students negotiated their religious identities can be understood through the lens of identity construction in plural contexts. According to Banks (2008), multicultural education allows individuals to maintain their cultural and religious identities while engaging with others. The findings show that students did not experience identity erosion; instead, they developed what can be termed reflective religiosity, where exposure to difference strengthens rather than weakens personal belief. This supports earlier research suggesting that interreligious learning can enhance self-understanding by situating one's beliefs within a broader comparative (Ipgrave, 2001; Moulin, 2015). The ability of students to relate Catholic teachings to concepts such as *rahmah* or *ahimsa* illustrates a process of cognitive integration rather than assimilation.

However, the effectiveness of this model is closely tied to the teacher's competence in managing diversity. The findings highlight the teacher's role in maintaining a non-coercive and respectful environment, which resonates with the concept of religious moderation in education (Halstead, 2005; Kartono et al., 2025; Zuhdi, 2018). By emphasizing shared values and avoiding doctrinal imposition, the teacher creates what may be described as a "safe space" for interreligious engagement. This is consistent with Allport (1954) contact hypothesis, which posits that meaningful interaction under conditions of equality and mutual respect can reduce prejudice. In this case, structured classroom interaction appears to facilitate positive intergroup relations. Nevertheless, it is important to critically examine potential limitations of this approach. One key concern is the risk of overgeneralizing religious similarities, which may lead to a superficial understanding of religious traditions. While the emphasis on universal values promotes harmony, it may also obscure significant theological differences. As Gearon (2013) cautions, reducing religion to ethics alone risks neglecting its doctrinal and transcendental dimensions. In this study, students often focused on moral commonalities while bypassing complex theological concepts, suggesting that depth of religious understanding may be limited. Another limitation relates to the dependency on teacher agency. The success of the inclusive model observed in this study appears highly contingent upon the teacher's pedagogical approach. Without a who is sensitive, reflective, and skilled in dialogical methods, the same curriculum could potentially be experienced as exclusionary. This raises questions about scalability and consistency across different educational settings. As noted by Biesta (2015), educational outcomes are not determined solely by curriculum design but also by the interpretive practices of educators.

Moreover, the institutional context itself presents a subtle tension. While inclusivity is practiced at the classroom level, the structural framework remains explicitly Catholic. This duality may create what can be described as “inclusive exclusivity,” where openness is facilitated within a bounded religious identity. Although students in this study did not report discomfort, it is possible that such a structure may not be equally effective in contexts with different social dynamics or less supportive school cultures. This highlights the importance of considering context when evaluating the transferability of the model.

Finally, the findings contribute to broader discussions on education for social cohesion in multicultural societies. The observed classroom practices demonstrate that religious education can serve as a site for cultivating empathy, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. This supports the argument that education plays a crucial role in fostering intercultural competence (UNESCO, 2015). However, achieving this requires a careful balance between respecting religious particularity and promoting shared humanity.

This study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing socio-religious identity negotiation as a multidimensional process encompassing cognitive (reinterpretation of meaning), social (interaction with peers and teachers), and contextual (institutional religious structure) dimensions. Unlike previous studies that treat identity as either stable or threatened in interfaith contexts, this research demonstrates that identity is dynamically maintained through selective engagement and reflexive interpretation. This perspective offers an alternative to assimilation-based or conflict-based models of interreligious interaction, positioning identity negotiation as a productive and ongoing process within plural educational environments.

In summary, this study suggests that inclusive, dialogical, and value-oriented religious education can effectively support interreligious understanding and identity development among students. At the same time, its success depends on pedagogical sensitivity, contextual factors, and a critical awareness of its limitations. Rather than offering a universal model, the findings highlight a contextually grounded approach that contributes to ongoing debates about the role of religion in pluralistic education systems.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Catholic Religious Education (CRE) in a multireligious classroom can function as an inclusive and dialogical learning space, rather than a site of doctrinal transmission. Within this context, Muslim students do not merely adapt passively but actively engage in identity negotiation, understood in this study as a social and interpretive process through which students maintain religious boundaries while selectively integrating shared moral meanings across traditions. The findings indicate that inclusivity is enabled through three interrelated conditions: (1) the transformation of religious instruction into value-oriented learning, (2) the teacher’s role as a dialogical facilitator who ensures non-coercive participation, and (3) everyday peer interaction that normalizes difference through routine collaboration. However, this inclusivity remains situated within a structurally Catholic framework, revealing a subtle tension between openness and institutional identity. In addition, the emphasis on universal values, while

effective in fostering mutual respect, may limit deeper engagement with theological differences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of interfaith learning discourse by showing that identity negotiation in religious education operates not only at a psychological level but also through social interaction and pedagogical mediation. It highlights the importance of moving beyond normative claims of tolerance toward a more process-oriented understanding of how students interpret, filter, and reconstruct meaning in interreligious encounters. Practically, the study underscores the need for pedagogical sensitivity, particularly in designing religious education that is inclusive without erasing difference. However, the reliance on teacher agency suggests that such practices may not be easily transferable without adequate training and institutional support.

This study is limited to a single institutional context and a small number of participants, which constrains its broader generalization. Future research is therefore recommended to (1) conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of interfaith learning on students' identity formation, and (2) develop comparative studies across different religious school settings to better understand how varying institutional contexts shape the dynamics of inclusion and identity negotiation.

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