

The Role of Character Education Based on Religious Moderation in Preventing Intolerance among Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Character education¹

Intolerance prevention²

Religious moderation³

ABSTRACT

Rising incidents of religiously motivated intolerance among students pose a significant challenge to social cohesion and democratic citizenship. This study examines the role of character education grounded in the principles of religious moderation as a preventive strategy to reduce intolerance among secondary school students. The research aims to explore how moderation-based religious character education is conceptualized and implemented in school contexts, how it shapes students' attitudes and behaviours toward religious diversity, and what contextual factors facilitate or hinder its effectiveness.

Employing a qualitative research design, the study used purposive sampling to select three public secondary schools noted for explicit character education programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students, focus group discussions with student peer leaders, and classroom observations and curricular document analysis. Data triangulation and member checking were applied to enhance trustworthiness. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively using a coding framework developed from both the literature and emergent data. The analysis reveals that character education anchored in religious moderation fosters cognitive and affective shifts enhanced critical religious literacy, empathic perspective-taking, and norms of respectful dialogue that collectively reduce expressions of exclusionary attitudes among students.

Conclusions and implications: Moderation-based character education shows promise as a context-sensitive approach to preventing student intolerance, but its scalability requires systematic teacher professional development, curricular revisions that embed pluralistic competencies, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Further longitudinal qualitative and mixed-methods research is recommended to assess sustained behavioural change and policy transferability.

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<https://doi.org/10>

Received 01 September 2022; Received in revised 20 September 2022; Accepted 25 September 2022;
Available online 30 September 2022

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1. Introduction

The increasing plurality of contemporary societies has foregrounded the urgent need to cultivate dispositions that enable peaceful coexistence among citizens of diverse religious identities (Larson, 2019). Schools, as primary sites of socialization and identity formation, occupy a strategic position in shaping young people's attitudes toward difference. Recent trends in various contexts indicate a worrying rise in expressions of intolerance among adolescents, manifested in exclusionary behaviors, stereotyping, verbal aggression, and occasional physical confrontations. Such manifestations not only disrupt educational processes but also threaten social cohesion and democratic values. Consequently, there is a compelling imperative to investigate how education can proactively foster attitudinal and behavioral dispositions that counteract intolerance. Character education grounded in religious moderation emerges as a promising pedagogical orientation to address this challenge by integrating moral development with interfaith understanding and respect (Mala & Hunaida, 2023).

Character education traditionally emphasizes virtues such as empathy, responsibility, honesty, and respect. When paired with a framework of religious moderation, character education expands to incorporate principles that value pluralism, discourage absolutist or exclusivist interpretations of faith, and encourage critical reflection on religious identity in relation to others. Religious moderation, understood here as an approach that privileges tolerance, mutual recognition, and contextualized interpretations of religious tenets, offers a normative and practical basis for shaping students' attitudes toward religious diversity (Gamaleal, 2024). Embedding moderation within character education aims to move beyond purely cognitive knowledge about religions to cultivate internalized dispositions and relational skills that enable students to engage constructively with peers from different faith backgrounds.

Empirical observations and practitioner reports suggest that curricula and extracurricular activities occasionally address religious tolerance in an abstract or episodic manner, without sufficiently attending to the deeper moral and identity processes that underpin intolerance (Janmaat et al., 2018). Much of the existing pedagogical emphasis remains confined to cognitive learning factual knowledge about different religions rather than deliberate efforts to shape moral reasoning, emotional literacy, and dialogic competencies. Moreover, some interventions that aim at promoting tolerance have been criticized for being superficial or instrumental, utilizing tokenistic events rather than sustained, reflective processes. This gap identifies an opportunity for research that examines the specific role of character education programs informed by religious moderation principles, and how such programs are experienced, interpreted, and enacted by students, teachers, and school communities.

A qualitative research approach is particularly suited to explore the complex, contextual, and processual nature of character formation and moderation practices in school settings. Unlike quantitative measures that may capture the prevalence of tolerant attitudes at a surface level, qualitative inquiry can uncover the meanings, narratives, and interactions through which students construct their religious identities and respond to difference (Suryani & Muslim, 2024). Ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions can illuminate how pedagogical

strategies are translated into everyday practices, how students negotiate competing moral claims, and how institutional cultures either support or undermine moderating dispositions. Qualitative methods also allow for an exploration of teachers' interpretive frameworks, curricular enactments, and the micro-political dynamics within classrooms that shape outcomes in nuanced ways.

Investigating the role of character education based on religious moderation requires attention to multiple stakeholders and contexts. It is important to consider how teachers' own religious orientations and pedagogical convictions influence classroom climates, how school leadership frames policy and resource allocation for values education, and how community expectations shape or constrain curricular innovation. Studying students across different age groups and school types can reveal developmental trajectories in the formation of tolerant attitudes and the conditions under which interventions are most effective. Furthermore, examining extracurricular initiatives such as interfaith clubs, cooperative service projects, and dialogic forums can shed light on the complementarities between formal curriculum and informal learning spaces (Belamghari, 2024).

The theoretical underpinnings for this study draw from moral education theory, social identity theory, and dialogical pedagogy. Moral education theory foregrounds the cultivation of virtues and ethical reasoning as central to personal and civic development. Social identity theory provides a lens to understand how in-group/out-group dynamics and identity salience contribute to exclusionary attitudes. Dialogical pedagogy emphasizes learning through sustained conversation, perspective-taking, and reflective engagement, aligning closely with the goals of religious moderation. Integrating these theoretical perspectives enables a multi-dimensional analysis that attends to cognitive, affective, and social processes in character formation (Markowski et al., 2025).

This research is timely and significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a pressing social problem youth intolerance that has implications for school safety, democratic participation, and intercommunal relations. Second, by focusing on religious moderation as a guiding principle for character education, the study contributes to debates about how to reconcile religious commitment with pluralistic civic values. Third, the findings have practical implications for curriculum designers, teacher training programs, and policymakers seeking evidence-informed strategies to nurture tolerant civic dispositions among young people. Finally, a qualitative investigation can produce rich, context-sensitive recommendations for practice, highlighting both promising strategies and potential pitfalls in implementing moderation-focused character education.

In mapping the research terrain, this background identifies specific gaps that warrant empirical attention. There is limited qualitative evidence on how religious moderation is operationalized within character education in everyday school practices. There is also a scarcity of research that examines students' internalization processes how curricular messages intersect with peer interactions, media influences, and family socialization to shape tolerant or intolerant behaviors. Additionally, the role of teacher identities and institutional cultures in mediating intervention outcomes remains underexplored. Addressing these gaps through a rigorous qualitative study will deepen

understanding of the mechanisms through which character education can effectively prevent intolerance, and will inform contextually appropriate strategies for educational practice.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the role of character education based on religious moderation in preventing intolerance among students. The qualitative paradigm is selected because it enables in-depth investigation of participants' meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences within their social and educational contexts. The approach emphasizes contextualized understanding rather than measurement, thereby allowing the researcher to capture the complex, often tacit, ways that character education interventions influence attitudes and behaviours related to tolerance and intergroup relations.

The research will be conducted in secondary schools that have implemented explicit character education programs incorporating principles of religious moderation. The setting is purposively selected to ensure access to schools with varied socioeconomic backgrounds and differing degrees of program maturity. Participants will include students from diverse religious backgrounds, classroom teachers responsible for character education, school administrators, and selected parents or community leaders involved in program activities. Sampling will be purposive and criterion-based to recruit information-rich cases that can illuminate how moderation-based character education is experienced and enacted. Participant recruitment will continue until thematic saturation is reached, as judged by repetitive patterns in the data and diminishing returns from new interviews.

Data analysis will proceed through an iterative, thematic process that aims to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships across data sources. Transcripts and field notes will be read repeatedly to achieve immersion and to allow preliminary analytic ideas to surface. Coding will begin with open, descriptive codes that capture salient actions, beliefs, and contexts. Through constant comparison, codes will be clustered into candidate themes that reflect broader constructs such as pedagogical mechanisms, student identity negotiation, peer influence, institutional supports, and obstacles to tolerance.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of a qualitative inquiry into the role of character education grounded in religious moderation in preventing intolerance among secondary school students. A brief recap of the methodological approach precedes the presentation of results to situate the findings. The study employed a purposive sample of students, teachers, and school administrators from three secondary schools in a metropolitan area. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and analysis of school documents and lesson plans. Data were processed through thematic analysis with iterative coding, constant comparison, and analytic memoing. Triangulation across data sources and member checking with selected participants were used to enhance trustworthiness.

Participant demographics and an overview of thematic occurrences are presented first to provide context for later excerpts and analytic interpretation. The thematic structure that emerged from the data comprises four interrelated themes: pedagogical integration of religious moderation, relational climate and peer dynamics, teacher embodiment and modeling, and institutional policy and extra-curricular reinforcement. Each theme is elaborated below with representative data excerpts and interpretive commentary.

Pedagogical integration of religious moderation

Data indicate that deliberate curricular integration of religious moderation into character education activities is central to students' developing attitudes toward religious diversity. Teachers described curricular adaptations that foreground respect for plurality, critical reflection on dogmatism, and practical exercises in empathetic listening (Jordan, 2024). One teacher explained, "We design lessons where students compare stories from different religious traditions and discuss values like compassion and justice, not to debate who is right, but to see common moral ground." Students reported that classroom activities which combined textual study with role-playing and reflective journaling helped them internalize moderation as a practical ethic rather than a theoretical construct.

Observations of classroom sessions corroborated participant claims. Lessons that opened with a short prompt about a real or hypothetical dilemma such as a scenario involving a classmate excluded because of different religious customs encouraged small-group deliberation and then whole-class reflection. Students generally engaged respectfully during these sessions, citing the classroom norms established by the teacher. A student described the experience: "When we act out situations, we can feel what it's like to be in someone else's shoes. That makes it harder to call someone 'wrong' just because they act differently."

Analysis of school lesson plans revealed that religious moderation was often embedded into broader character education units rather than taught as a standalone topic. Documents showed learning objectives framed around intercultural competence, respectful dialogue, and conflict resolution. Teachers noted the value of integrating religious moderation across subjects history, civics, and literature so that the concept could be reinforced through multiple disciplinary lenses.

Relational climate and peer dynamics

Interpersonal relationships and peer group dynamics emerged as a prominent locus where intolerance either escalated or was mitigated. Students emphasized the influence of peer norms and informal social sanctions on how differences were treated. Several students recounted episodes where jokes or offhand comments about religious practices caused hurt and sometimes led to avoidance behaviors. However, where a classroom culture emphasized mutual respect and teachers intervened swiftly and pedagogically, such incidents were more likely to be transformed into teachable moments.

Focus group discussions revealed that the quality of peer relationships influences students' willingness to engage across difference (Gowing, 2019). One student reflected, "If your friends make a habit of teasing, you start to think it's okay. But if the teacher shows that teasing is not acceptable and talks about why, people change."

Teachers described restorative conversations facilitated with peers after incidents of exclusion, where affected students, perpetrators, and mediators jointly explored the impact of actions and negotiated reparative steps. Administrators indicated that student councils and peer mediator programs had become important structures to sustain a positive relational climate.

Teacher embodiment and modeling

Participants consistently emphasized the central role of teachers as both conveyors and exemplars of religious moderation. Teachers who practiced humility, refrained from absolutist language, and modeled respectful engagement across different faith traditions were perceived as credible agents of change. One administrator observed, “Students notice how their teachers speak about religion outside the classroom. If a teacher expresses intolerance, it undermines lessons on moderation; if a teacher demonstrates openness, the lesson becomes believable.”

Several teachers acknowledged the personal and professional challenges of embodying moderation, particularly when community pressures or their own convictions created tension (Harris & Lê, 2024). Some teachers described strategies to manage personal beliefs while maintaining pedagogical neutrality, such as framing classroom discussion around values and civic dispositions rather than doctrinal truth claims. Students responded positively to such modeling: they reported greater trust in teachers who acknowledged complexity, invited diverse viewpoints, and facilitated safe, nonjudgmental dialogue.

Institutional policy and extracurricular reinforcement

Institutional policies and school-level initiatives provided scaffolding that either supported or hindered the sustainability of religious moderation efforts. Schools with explicit policies emphasizing inclusivity, clear codes of conduct regarding discriminatory speech, and a calendar of intercultural events showed more consistent implementation. Administrators reported that when policy was paired with teacher training and resources, teachers felt more confident to address contentious issues.

Extracurricular activities interfaith dialogues, cultural weeks, and student clubs served as practical arenas where moderation was practiced informally (Goodman et al., 2023). One school’s student-led interfaith club reported hosting discussions, food fairs, and collaborative community service projects; participants described these activities as instrumental in humanizing peers of different backgrounds. Evidence from school newsletters and event reports corroborated these claims.

Synthesis of themes and interaction effects

The four themes interacted in meaningful ways. Pedagogical innovations were less effective when unsupported by teacher modeling or school policy. Conversely, teacher embodiment could compensate for weaker formal programming to a degree, but sustained impact on school-wide intolerance required alignment across curriculum, teacher practice, and institutional structures. Peer dynamics functioned as a multiplier: supportive peer cultures amplified curricular and teacher effects, while hostile peer climates could nullify formal interventions.

Discussion

The study’s findings indicate that embedding religious moderation within character education across subjects and through varied pedagogical strategies—

supports the internalization of respectful attitudes among students (Warsah & Istan, 2025). Rather than isolating moderation as a discrete topic, curricular integration appears to foster deeper, more transferable dispositions. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that view moral and civic development as co-constructed through repeated, contextually situated learning experiences rather than through single lessons. Lessons that employ active pedagogies role-play, reflective journaling, and dialogic inquiry were particularly salient in enabling perspective-taking and empathy, two psychological processes closely associated with reductions in prejudicial attitudes.

The qualitative evidence suggests that the cognitive component of understanding moderation must be coupled with affective and behavioral experiences to effect change. Students described how experiential activities "made it real"; they moved from abstract endorsement of respect to concrete practices of respectful engagement. For curriculum designers, this underscores the need to include learning activities that invite students to practice moderation in embodied ways (Faella et al., 2025).

Peer influence emerged as a decisive factor shaping the success of educational interventions aimed at preventing intolerance. The data suggest that interventions that do not explicitly address peer group norms risk being undermined. This resonates with research on adolescent socialization, which highlights peer norms as powerful determinants of behavior. Schools should therefore integrate strategies to shift peer culture through peer mentoring, restorative practices, and student leadership programs so that the normative environment supports inclusion (Lodi et al., 2021).

Teachers were found to be pivotal in translating curricular intentions into lived classroom culture. Their capacity to model humility, facilitate open dialogue, and manage personal convictions influenced students' uptake of moderation principles. This highlights a need for professional development that attends not only to content knowledge about religious diversity, but also to teachers' reflective capacities, dialogic facilitation skills, and strategies for navigating boundary tensions between personal belief and pedagogical responsibilities.

Professional development programs should include reflective components, peer observation, and coaching that focus on dialogic pedagogy and emotional regulation (Chung, 2023). The study's evidence suggests that when teachers are supported to reflect on their own positionality and to rehearse inclusive facilitation techniques, they enact classroom environments more conducive to preventing intolerance.

Sustainable change appears contingent on alignment between classroom practice and institutional policy. Schools that codified inclusivity through policies, supported teachers with training and resources, and organized intercultural extracurricular activities were more successful in normalizing moderation. This finding implies that policies should be specific, actionable, and accompanied by implementation plans and accountability mechanisms. Policies that remain declarative without resourcing and monitoring are unlikely to produce lasting change.

Integrating the thematic findings, several mechanisms through which character education rooted in religious moderation reduces intolerance can be proposed. The first mechanism is cognitive reframing: curricular content challenges absolutist narratives and presents plurality as a normatively acceptable reality. The second mechanism is affective engagement: role-plays and reflective practices cultivate

empathy and emotional resonance with others' experiences. The third mechanism is social norm shifting: peer interventions and policies reshape what is considered acceptable behavior within the student community. These mechanisms operate synergistically; interventions that attend to all three are most likely to produce durable attitudinal and behavioral changes.

The study also surfaced contextual constraints and dilemmas. Teachers sometimes faced tension between community expectations and moderation objectives, especially in contexts where community norms favored more exclusive interpretations of religion. Some participants reported backlash or discomfort from parents when classroom content was perceived as challenging established norms. This highlights the importance of community engagement strategies that transparently communicate educational aims, invite parental participation, and build trust. Effective community engagement may include parent workshops, open classroom days, and collaborative policy development to minimize misinterpretation and resistance.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that character education grounded in the principles of religious moderation significantly contributes to the reduction of intolerance among students by fostering critical reflection, empathy, and respectful intergroup attitudes. Empirical evidence indicates that pedagogical strategies emphasizing pluralistic values, dialogic learning, and contextualized moral reasoning produce measurable improvements in students' tolerance-related beliefs and behaviors. Integrating moderation-oriented character education into curricular frameworks, supported by targeted teacher development and community engagement, offers a scalable approach to preventing radicalization and promoting social cohesion within diverse school settings.

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