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Teachers' Roles in Fostering Tolerance Values among Elementary School Students

Caesaria Primananda Wiedy✉, State University of Surabaya, Indonesia
Maretha Dellarosa, State University of Surabaya, Indonesia
Nady Febri Ariffiando, Indiana University Bloomington, United States

✉ caesaria.22189@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstract: Elementary classrooms in Indonesia bring together students from diverse religious, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds, and this study aims to describe how teachers foster tolerance values among sixth-grade students at a public elementary school in Surabaya through the lens of Bandura's Social Learning Theory. A qualitative case study was conducted using passive participatory observation, semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers, the deputy head of student affairs, the deputy head of curriculum, and students, and document analysis, with source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking supporting trustworthiness. The findings show three interconnected teacher roles: as role models through the daily Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun (5S) routine, as educators through reflective lesson openings and weekly mixed-group seating rotation, and as mediators and facilitators through neutral handling of differing opinions. These patterns can be interpreted through the attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation processes of Social Learning Theory, and they highlight the relevance of consistent teacher practices and inclusive school routines for tolerance education in elementary schools.

Keywords: Diversity; Teachers' role; Tolerance; Social Learning Theory; Elementary school students.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is characterized by religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, and schools are among the first institutions where children encounter this diversity in daily life. Research by Raihani (2018) examined education for multicultural citizens in Indonesia by considering both policies and practices. Research with Indonesian Muslim pre-service teachers identified three discourses through which participants understood religious tolerance, namely spiritual Islam, postmodern sensibilities, and concern over the growing conservative, Islamist, and radical groups (Wijaya et al., 2022). Recent evidence from interviews with 152 teachers in 28 high schools in East Java indicates that the concept of tolerance has not been wholeheartedly embraced by teachers (Sirry et al., 2024).

In this study, tolerance refers to openness toward accepting and respecting differences in views, beliefs, customs, and behaviors without resentment, consistent with tolerance as acceptance, respect, and appreciation of differences (Hjerm et al., 2020). Research on cultural diversity climate shows that equality, inclusion, and recognition of cultural pluralism can support students' psychological school adjustment (Schachner et al., 2016) and school belonging (Schachner et al., 2019). Although these studies were conducted in Germany, they highlight the relevance of how schools organize diversity in everyday practice. Research also indicates that intergroup contact predicts the development of intergroup attitudes during adolescence (Wölfer et al., 2016), while studies have examined the relationships between classroom diversity approaches and intergroup outcomes (Schwarzenthal et al., 2018) and the development of intercultural competence from early to late adolescence (Schwarzenthal et al., 2017). These findings provide a basis for examining how regular interaction among students from different backgrounds may support tolerance in Indonesian elementary classrooms.

Teachers are central to these classroom processes because they interact with students daily and can serve as models of social behavior. According to Bandura (2001b), observational learning is governed by the processes of attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation. A survey of 186 teachers in 22 culturally diverse secondary schools in Germany showed that perceived norms of cultural pluralism and perceived norms of equality and inclusion were associated with facets of teachers' intercultural self-efficacy (Ulbricht et al., 2022). Research in ethnically diverse classrooms has also examined individual differences in teachers' self-efficacy (Geerlings et al., 2018) and teachers' approaches toward cultural diversity in relation to burnout and self-efficacy (Gutentag et al., 2018).

Research involving several informants has examined how cultural diversity approaches at school are perceived, as in a multi-informant and mixed-methods study (Civitillo et al., 2017). School diversity policies have likewise been examined in relation to belonging and achievement gaps between minority and majority youth (Celeste et al., 2019). These studies raise questions about how teachers' everyday conduct operates among younger students in elementary school settings. Examining teacher conduct

alongside instructional and mediating practices can clarify how tolerance is fostered through everyday classroom interactions.

Previous studies in Indonesia have examined teachers' perspectives and practices related to multicultural education. Afifuddin et al. (2025), using a survey of 30 primary school teachers alongside interviews and observations of 10 teachers, identified moderately positive attitudes toward multicultural values and perceived differences between policy expectations and classroom practices. Teachers' approaches toward cultural diversity have also been linked to diversity-related burnout and self-efficacy in international research (Gutentag et al., 2018). These findings point to the need for further investigation of how multicultural values are perceived and implemented by educational stakeholders (Afifuddin et al., 2025). Together, these studies provide a basis for examining how teachers enact tolerance in everyday elementary classroom interactions.

Existing studies have examined teachers' perceptions, multicultural education policies, and cooperative learning, while research in multiethnic classrooms links teachers' approaches to equality, inclusion, and cultural pluralism with students' intergroup outcomes (Schwarzenthal et al., 2018; Civitillo et al., 2017). Further research is needed to understand how teacher modeling, instructional organization, and disagreement mediation operate together in Indonesian elementary classrooms. Preliminary observations at a public elementary school in Surabaya identified religious, cultural, socioeconomic, and academic diversity that shapes daily classroom interactions. This study aims to examine how teachers foster tolerance among sixth-grade students in this diverse school context. Using Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study extends previous research by analyzing teachers' modeling, instructional, and mediating practices within an elementary classroom. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions. 1) How do teachers demonstrate tolerance as role models in daily school routines? 2) How do teachers integrate tolerance into lesson planning and classroom management as educators? 3) How do teachers mediate and facilitate differences of opinion among students? 4) How do these practices correspond with the attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation processes of Social Learning Theory?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how teachers foster tolerance in an elementary school setting. Case studies support an in-depth exploration of complex issues in real-life contexts (Crowe et al., 2011). The study was conducted at *SDN Siwalankerto* II/419 Surabaya (Siwalankerto II/419 State Elementary School, Surabaya, Indonesia), a public elementary school serving students from diverse religious, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds. Participants included classroom teachers, including Mr. R, a Grade 6 Class B teacher, the deputy head of student affairs, the deputy head of curriculum, and Grade 6 students. Initials are used to protect participants' identities. These informants were selected because of their involvement in classroom practices, student affairs, and curriculum implementation.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: passive participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Table 1 summarizes the data sources, analytic focus, and data types for each technique.

Table 1. Data Collection Techniques, Sources, and Analytic Focus

Technique	Data source	Analytic focus	Data type
Passive participatory observation	Grade 6 classroom activities and school entrance routines	Natural teacher-student interactions and daily routines	Primary
Semi-structured in-depth interviews	Classroom teachers (including Mr. R, Grade 6 Class B), deputy head of student affairs, deputy head of curriculum, and students	Teachers' roles and indicators of tolerance	Primary
Document analysis	Teaching modules, school profile, and photographic documentation of activities	Integration of tolerance in lesson planning and the school context	Secondary

Classroom observations captured teacher-student interactions and school routines, semi-structured interviews explored teacher roles and tolerance indicators among the informants listed in Table 1, including Mr. R on 11 December 2025, and document analysis examined teaching modules, the school profile, and photographic documentation of activities. Data credibility was supported through source and technique triangulation, which enables a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon by comparing evidence across methods and sources (Carter et al., 2014), as well as member checking to assess the accuracy and resonance of findings with participants' experiences (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher served as the primary instrument, and data analysis involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, with emerging themes interpreted through Bandura's (2001b) four observational learning processes: attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation. Reporting followed the quality criteria proposed by Tracy (2010) and the thematic analysis procedures discussed by Nowell et al. (2017).

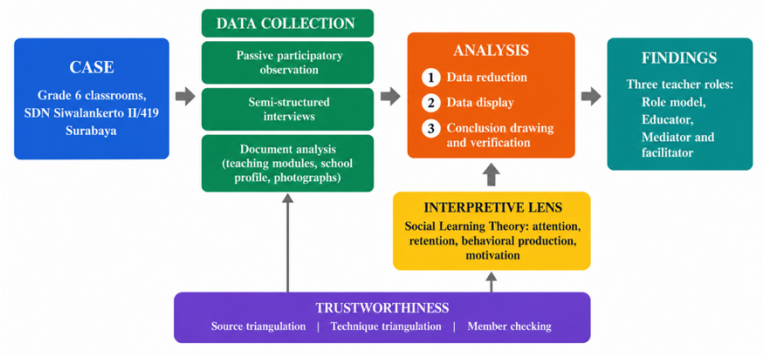


Figure 1. Research Design and Analytic Flow of the Case Study

RESULTS

The analysis identified three interconnected teacher roles in fostering tolerance among Grade 6 students: role model, educator, and mediator and facilitator. Table 2 summarizes the practices, data sources, and illustrative evidence associated with each role.

Table 2. Teacher Roles in Fostering Tolerance, Supporting Practices, and Evidence

Teacher role	Key practices	Data source	Illustrative evidence
Role model	Consistent 5S routine (*Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun*) at the school entrance; greeting students regardless of background; conduct visible to students inside and outside the classroom	Interview with Mr. R (11 February 2026); observation; photographic documentation	"... And we as teachers must set a good example"; "Every move a teacher makes is definitely observed"
Educator	Introductory activity encouraging reflection on togetherness before the main lesson; weekly seating rotation in a mixed-group format	Teaching module; classroom observation	Students step outside exclusive social circles and collaborate with anyone, regardless of gender or other backgrounds
Mediator and facilitator	Neutral mediation of differences of opinion; listening to and valuing all opinions; postponing judgment and inviting the class to examine an answer together	Observation of class discussions	Teachers do not immediately determine which opinion is correct and which is incorrect

Table 2 shows that each role was expressed through concrete and repeated practices in the school routine, the lesson plan, and the discussion process. The table indicates that the data sources differ across roles, which reflects the varied settings in which teachers' practices occurred.

Teachers as Role Models

In an interview, Mr. R, a Grade 6 Class B teacher, explained that classroom teachers strive to be role models in integrating tolerance into the classroom and school environment, stating, "... And we as teachers must set a good example" (Interview, 11 February 2026). This role extends beyond lesson time because students observe teachers' behavior across the school environment, as Mr. R expressed: "Every move a teacher makes is definitely observed ... Other students will certainly notice too" (Interview, 11 February 2026). The clearest example was the *Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun* (5S) culture (Smile, Greet, Say hello, Polite, Courteous), which teachers enacted every morning at the school entrance. Through greeting students regardless of their background, teachers displayed inclusive behavior that students could observe directly.



Figure 2. A Teacher Implementing the *Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, Santun* (5S) Culture at the School Entrance

Figure 2 shows a teacher engaging students in the 5S routine at the school entrance, which illustrates the daily and visible character of teacher modeling. The routine takes place before lessons begin, so students who arrive encounter the same model of greeting. For readers, this image clarifies how an abstract concept such as role modeling is translated into a specific, observable action. The benefit is practical, since school leaders and teachers can recognize the components of the routine and consider adapting them in similar settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that fostering tolerance in the Grade 6 classroom involved the organization of the classroom's social environment through three connected teacher roles. This section interprets each role through the modeling processes of Social Learning Theory, compares the patterns with previous research, and considers the implications for practice. According to Bandura (2001b), observational learning is governed by attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation, and these processes serve as the interpretive frame for the discussion. The interpretations are offered as analytic readings of qualitative evidence from a single case, and they should be read in light of this scope.

Role Modeling: Attention and Retention

The first finding shows that students observed teachers' daily 5S routine and inclusive greetings inside and outside the classroom. These practices reflect attention and retention, as consistent models are more likely to attract attention and be remembered (Bandura, 2001b). Teachers' support and conflict have been associated with peer relationships, social hierarchy, and prosocial or aggressive peer interactions (Hendrickx et al., 2016), while classroom-door greetings have been linked to increased academic engaged time and reduced disruptive behavior among middle school students (Cook et al., 2018). Research on diversity approaches also highlights teacher-student relationships as a relevant factor in school outcomes (Baysu et al., 2021). Teachers can reinforce these modeling opportunities by explaining the importance of tolerant behavior, consistent with reflective introductory activities and research on cultural pluralism and school climate (Smith et al., 2020). However, because student behavioral change was not measured, these findings indicate opportunities for modeling rather than demonstrated effects.

Teaching Practice and Classroom Management: Behavioral Production

The second finding shows that weekly mixed-group seating rotations and reflective lesson openings provided opportunities for students to collaborate with peers outside their usual social circles. This practice reflects behavioral production, which involves opportunities to enact observed behaviors (Bandura, 2001b). School-based intergroup contact has been associated with improved relations among adolescents in postconflict Northern Ireland (Reimer et al., 2022), while cooperative learning has been associated with more positive and less negative group work behavior among Grade 1 pupils (Veldman et al., 2020). Research on immigrant students' positioning within teacher-student interaction networks also highlights the role of classroom relationships in educational inclusion (Ortega et al., 2020). Therefore, teachers can combine seating rotations with cooperative tasks and reflection, although further research is needed to determine their effects on student interactions over time.

Mediation and Facilitation: Motivation

The third finding shows that teachers mediated disagreements by listening to different opinions, postponing judgment, and encouraging collective reflection. These practices reflect motivation because respectful responses communicate which behaviors are accepted in the classroom (Bandura, 2001b). Research has highlighted the importance of teacher responses to student contributions in relation to curriculum mastery, reasoning, and attitudes (Howe et al., 2019), as well as the role of classroom cultural diversity climate in secondary education (Schachner et al., 2021). Teachers' approaches to controversial issues vary from avoidance to finding common ground (Kello, 2016), while spontaneous classroom controversies require teachers to respond appropriately (Cassar et al., 2021). Professional development in mediating disagreement may therefore benefit from research on multicultural education reform in teacher education (Cherng and Davis, 2019) and teachers' multicultural attitudes in relation to school policy, school climate, and burnout (Dubbeld et al., 2019).

Integrating the Three Roles

The findings connect three teacher roles with the four modeling processes of Social Learning Theory. The daily 5S routine attracts attention, while repeated routines and reflective activities may support retention. Mixed-group seating provides opportunities for behavioral production, and neutral mediation supports motivation by encouraging respectful consideration of differing opinions (Bandura, 2001b). These practices complement one another in establishing classroom conditions that support tolerance, consistent with research on the relationship between teachers' and students' acculturation strategies (Van Praag et al., 2016). They also complement findings on religious tolerance developed through contact-based group assignments in Indonesia (Wijaya Mulya and Aditomo, 2019) and research on equality, inclusion, and student relationships with teachers and peers (Baysu et al., 2021; Hendrickx et al., 2016). Schools may apply these practices through consistent teacher modeling, structured peer interactions, and fair mediation, while adapting implementation to their educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how teachers foster tolerance among Grade 6 students in a diverse public elementary school in Surabaya through Social Learning Theory. The findings identified three interconnected teacher roles: role models through the 5S routine and inclusive treatment, educators through reflective lesson openings and mixed-group seating rotations, and mediators through fair handling of differing opinions, reflecting the attention, retention, behavioral production, and motivation processes. These findings provide qualitative insights from a single case and suggest that teachers and school leaders can strengthen tolerance education through consistent modeling, structured peer interaction, and professional development in inclusive classroom management. Future research should involve multiple schools, student perspectives, and longitudinal designs to examine the relationship between these practices and changes in students' tolerant behavior.

AI Use Statement

AI-assisted tools were used, if applicable, to improve language clarity and readability. The authors verified the final text and accept responsibility for the published work.

Author Contributions

CPW: coordinated the study, conducted data collection, and prepared the initial manuscript. MD: contributed to data interpretation and thematic analysis. NFA: provided critical feedback and contributed to manuscript refinement. All authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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