

# Religious Education, Secular Pluralism, and Multicultural Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Public High Schools in Indonesia and the United States

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**Abstract:** This study examines how religious education and secular pluralism shape the formation of multicultural citizenship in public high schools in Indonesia and the United States through a comparative lens. It aims to compare how two contrasting constitutional frameworks, religiously integrated public education and constitutionally secular public education, influence civic formation within plural school environments. The study employed a qualitative multiple-case comparative design involving four public high schools, two in Indonesia and two in the United States. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and students, as well as classroom observations conducted both onsite and online, and document analysis. The findings suggest that multicultural citizenship is not solely determined by the presence or absence of religious instruction, rather it is shaped by the interaction between constitutional frameworks and pedagogical practices within schooling context. In Indonesia, religious education operates within a constitutional framework that recognises religion as a foundation element of national identity, whereas in the United States, religious instruction is formally excluded from public schooling. In both contexts, dialogical pedagogy emerges as the key mediating mechanism that translates institutional structures into inclusive civic dispositions. The originality of this study lies in its structured cross-national comparison and in the introduction of the concept of civic architectures to explain how constitutional regimes interact with pedagogical practice. The study contributes to global debates by challenging binary assumptions about religion and secularism in democratic education and by advancing a process-oriented account of multicultural citizenship formation.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana pendidikan agama dan pluralisme sekuler membentuk kewargaan multikultural di sekolah menengah atas negeri di Indonesia dan Amerika Serikat. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah membandingkan bagaimana dua kerangka konstitusional yang berbeda, yaitu pendidikan publik yang terintegrasi dengan agama dan pendidikan publik yang secara konstitusional bersifat sekuler, memengaruhi pembentukan kewargaan dalam lingkungan sekolah yang majemuk. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif komparatif multi-kasus yang melibatkan empat sekolah menengah atas negeri, dua di Indonesia dan dua di Amerika Serikat. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan guru, administrator, dan siswa, observasi kelas baik secara langsung maupun



*daring, serta analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan kewargaan multikultural tidak ditentukan oleh ada atau tidaknya pengajaran agama. Di Indonesia, pendidikan agama berfungsi sebagai jangkar moral yang diperkuat melalui kurikulum dan praktik komunal, sedangkan di Amerika Serikat pluralisme dikembangkan melalui wacana konstitusional, kerangka kebijakan, dan kajian akademik. Dalam kedua konteks tersebut, pedagogi dialogis menjadi mekanisme utama yang menjembatani struktur institusional dengan pembentukan sikap kewargaan yang inklusif. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada komparasi lintas negara yang terstruktur serta pengenalan konsep arsitektur kewargaan untuk menjelaskan interaksi antara rezim konstitusional dan praktik pedagogis. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskursus global dengan menantang dikotomi antara agama dan sekularisme dalam pendidikan demokratis, serta menawarkan pemahaman berbasis proses mengenai pembentukan kewargaan multikultural.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of cultural, religious, and ideological diversity across contemporary societies has significantly reshaped the expectations placed upon public education systems. Public senior high schools are no longer understood solely as institutions for academic instruction; they are increasingly regarded as civic environments in which democratic dispositions, ethical reasoning, and intercultural competence must be cultivated (Jubba et al., 2022; Banks, 2022; Biesta, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). In plural societies, the management of difference is a political concern and a pedagogical responsibility. Schools function as formative spaces where students learn how to negotiate identity, recognize diversity, and develop shared civic commitments. Within this broader transformation, religious education occupies a particularly complex position because it engages directly with belief systems, moral frameworks, and collective identities (Marshall, 2025; Yalvaç 2025; Lewin et al., 2023; Gearon, 2015).

Recent international scholarship emphasizes that religious education must move beyond confessional transmission toward dialogical, reflexive, and citizenship-oriented approaches if it is to contribute positively to democratic life (Ardiansyah et al., 2025; Veugelers, 2023). Dialogical pedagogy, critical reflection, and ethical deliberation are widely recognized as core components of inclusive education in plural societies (Wehr et al., 2025; Bosio, 2023; Shaw, 2023). At the same time, critical perspectives warn that religious education can reproduce boundary-making and exclusivist orientations if it is not embedded within inclusive institutional cultures and pedagogical structures (Öksüz & Van Liempt, 2026; Muhammad et al., 2025). These debates reveal an enduring theoretical question within global education research: under what conditions does religious education contribute to multicultural citizenship rather than sectarian differentiation?

Despite substantial theoretical development, significant empirical and comparative gaps remain. Much of the literature on religious education in Europe examines dialogical approaches within minority religious settings, while research in the United States predominantly focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks in secular public schools (Eckert & Eckert, 2025; Sajir, 2023; Osakwe & Onyeka Destiny, 2025). Studies from Muslim-majority contexts often address curriculum reform, religious moderation, or policy discourse at the macro level rather than classroom-level pedagogical enactment (Muis, 2025; Alkouatli, 2023; Sahin, 2018). As a result, there is limited cross-national analysis of how different constitutional arrangements between state and religion shape the pedagogical formation of multicultural citizenship in public secondary education.

The contrast between Indonesia and the United States provides a particularly productive site for comparative inquiry. In Indonesia, religious education is constitutionally mandated and embedded within the national curriculum of public schools. Islamic Religious Education is compulsory for Muslim students and is explicitly linked to moral development and character formation (Ihsan et al., 2024; Harjatanaya, 2025; Utami, 2022). In many public senior high schools, religious instruction is reinforced through co-curricular and extracurricular activities that integrate ethical reflection, communal practices, and school-wide character programs. In contrast, public schools in the United States operate within a constitutional framework that separates church and state. Public institutions are prohibited from delivering doctrinal religious instruction. Religion may be studied academically in courses such as world religions, comparative religion, history, or philosophy, but civic formation is typically pursued through pluralism-oriented curricula, diversity initiatives, and anti-discrimination policies (Maxwell et al., 2023; Perry et al., 2023; Ferris & Robbins, 2024).

Although these two national contexts differ significantly in their constitutional and institutional arrangements, global scholarship rarely compares them directly. Research frequently treats compulsory religious education and secular public schooling as distinct domains, often implying that secular frameworks are inherently more compatible with multicultural democracy, while faith-based education requires reform to avoid exclusivism. Such binary assumptions oversimplify the relationship between religion and civic formation. They overlook the possibility that compulsory religious education, when pedagogically structured through dialogical engagement and contextual ethical reasoning, may foster inclusive civic dispositions. Conversely, they risk presuming that secular institutional arrangements automatically generate multicultural outcomes, despite the central role of pedagogy and school culture in shaping student experience.

Another critical gap concerns micro-level empirical evidence. There is limited comparative research examining how teachers in different constitutional regimes enact multicultural principles in everyday classroom practice, and how students interpret and experience these pedagogical processes. Without grounded cross-national analysis, theoretical debates about religious education, secularism, and multicultural citizenship remain abstract and insufficiently connected to lived educational realities.

This study addresses these gaps through a comparative qualitative investigation of four public senior high schools: State Senior High School 2 Jember and State Senior High School Senduro Lumajang in Indonesia, and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Virginia and Stuyvesant High School in New York in the United States. The Indonesian schools represent public institutions in which Islamic Religious Education is compulsory and institutionally integrated into broader character and communal programs. The United States schools represent academically selective public institutions operating within secular constitutional constraints, where religion is addressed within academic or civic frameworks rather than confessional instruction.

The study seeks to examine how these contrasting constitutional and institutional contexts structure the relationship between religion, secularism, and multicultural citizenship in everyday educational practice. It investigates how schools in both countries conceptualize and operationalize civic pluralism, how teachers design and implement pedagogical strategies to engage religious and cultural diversity, and how students experience these processes within their respective institutional environments. By analyzing both structural frameworks and classroom-level enactment, the research aims to clarify how different state–religion configurations create distinct opportunities and constraints in fostering inclusive civic formation.

Guided by theories of multicultural citizenship (Banks, 2022; Hunduma & Mekuria, 2024; Steyn & Vanyoro, 2024), democratic education (Altun, 2022; Asenbaum, 2022; Biesta, 2023), and dialogical religious pedagogy (Rymarz, 2024; Lundie et al., 2022), this study advances three major contributions. First, it introduces a systematic cross-national comparison that links constitutional arrangements to pedagogical practice. Second, it moves beyond normative assumptions about the superiority of either religious or secular models by empirically examining how multicultural citizenship is constructed in practice. Third, it reconceptualizes religious education and secular pluralism as alternative civic architectures through which public schools may cultivate democratic coexistence.

Rather than assuming that faith-based education is inherently divisive or that secular schooling is inherently inclusive, this research argues that multicultural citizenship emerges through intentional pedagogical design, institutional coherence, and civic orientation. By integrating comparative empirical analysis with contemporary global theory, the study contributes to international debates on how education systems negotiate the complex relationship between religion, secularism, and democratic pluralism in diverse societies. Against the backdrop, unlike existing studies that examine religious education or secularism in isolation or within single national contexts, this study offers a comparative and mechanism-oriented analysis of how religious education operates as an institutional mediator of secular pluralism and multicultural citizenship in public high schools.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative comparative methodology to examine how religious education is institutionally framed and pedagogically enacted within a

secular pluralist context in public senior high schools in Indonesia and the United States. A multiple-case approach enables systematic cross-national comparison while preserving contextual depth (Yin, 2023; Stake, 2023; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2021). Each school was treated as a bounded case within a distinct constitutional state-religion framework: compulsory religious education in Indonesia and constitutionally secular public schooling in the United States.

Four public senior high schools were purposively selected to ensure institutional comparability and contextual contrast (Palinkas et al., 2015). In Indonesia, the study was conducted at State Senior High School 2 Jember and State Senior High School Senduro Lumajang, where Islamic Religious Education is compulsory and reinforced through co-curricular religious and character programs embedded in daily routines. In the United States, the research was conducted at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (Virginia) and Stuyvesant High School (New York), both academically selective public schools operating under constitutional separation of church and state. While confessional instruction is prohibited, religion is addressed within academic subjects and supported by diversity and civic initiatives.

The study involved 32 participants: eight teachers, four administrators, and twenty students. Indonesian participants included Islamic Religious Education teachers, character-program administrators, and students from diverse backgrounds. United States participants included social studies, humanities, or ethics teachers; administrators responsible for diversity or equity initiatives; and students representing diverse ethnic and worldview backgrounds. Participants were selected using purposive and maximum variation sampling to capture diverse institutional and experiential perspectives (Tracy, 2023).

Data were collected over six months through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, allowing methodological triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or online, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Observations focused on Islamic Religious Education and related religious activities in Indonesia, and on courses addressing religion, ethics, or civic pluralism in the United States. Field notes documented instructional strategies, dialogical engagement, and student interaction patterns. Document analysis included curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, mission statements, and diversity or character education policies, which were coded alongside other data sources (Bowen, 2009).

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process involved within-case analysis followed by cross-case comparison to identify convergences and divergences between compulsory religious education and secular pluralist frameworks. Coding combined inductive theme development with theoretically informed categories drawn from multicultural citizenship and democratic education theory. A comparative coding matrix was developed to trace thematic patterns across cases.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation, member checking, and maintenance of an audit trail (Tracy, 2023). All participants provided informed consent, pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity was maintained throughout the cross-national research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

#### Constitutional Regime and the Framing of Religion in Public Schooling

In the Indonesian public senior high schools, religion is constitutionally embedded within public education and formally mandated through compulsory Islamic Religious Education for Muslim students. This structural arrangement legitimizes religion as a normative civic foundation rather than as a private domain separated from public schooling. Teachers consistently framed religious instruction as guidance for social coexistence in plural contexts.

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers rarely confined discussion to doctrinal explanation. Instead, they repeatedly invited students to connect Islamic ethical concepts such as *ukhuwah*, tolerance, and justice with peer interaction in plural settings. Morning observations further showed collective recitation activities preceding formal lessons, reinforcing the visibility of religion in the public institutional space.

**Table 1.** Constitutional Embedding of Religion (Indonesia)

Participant Code	Role	Interview Excerpt
T1-ID	Teacher	"If I only explain the theory, students may understand the text but not apply it. So I always connect Islamic values with how they treat friends from different religions."
T3-ID	Teacher	"Because religion is part of the national curriculum, we are teaching rituals. We are shaping how students become responsible citizens in a diverse society."
T4-ID	Teacher	"If religion stays only in personal worship, students will not see its social meaning. We must show them that respecting difference is also part of faith."
A2-ID	Administrator	"In our school, religious activities are not extracurricular additions; they are part of our institutional identity as a public school."
S2-ID	Student	"Before, I thought religious lessons were only about worship. Now I realize they also teach us how to live with others."
S6-ID	Student	"When we pray together every day, it creates a sense of unity. But we are also reminded that not everyone has the same belief, so we must respect that."
S9-ID	Student	"I used to avoid talking about differences because I was afraid of conflict. But now I feel more confident discussing it respectfully."
S11-ID	Student	"I learned that being a good Muslim also means protecting friends who are different."

The interview data align with observational findings. During classroom visits, teachers contextualized Qur'anic verses within real-life social dilemmas, asking students how Islamic ethics apply to friendship, disagreement, and group collaboration. Administrators' statements further confirm that devotional activities such as *Asmaul Husna* recitation, congregational prayers, and Qur'anic reading sessions are institutionally normalized rather than treated as optional religious clubs.



**Figure 1.** Morning Asmaul Husna Recitation and Collective Religious Activity

The figure illustrates how devotional practices are integrated into the public school routine in Indonesia, where observations showed strong student participation, coordinated teacher supervision, and ritual continuity embedded within the academic schedule. This institutional visibility positions religion as a shared civic-moral resource rather than a private domain. In contrast, public high schools in the United States operate under constitutional separation of church and state, where doctrinal religious instruction is prohibited. Classroom observations confirmed that religion is addressed within academic inquiry in subjects such as social studies and humanities, without devotional practice or collective rituals during school hours. Administrators emphasized institutional neutrality as a constitutional obligation aimed at safeguarding equal rights and ensuring impartiality.

**Table 2.** Constitutional Neutrality and Academic Framing (United States)

Participant Code	Role	Interview Excerpt
A3-US	Administrator	"We cannot promote any particular religion. Our responsibility is to maintain equal respect for all students."
A5-US	Administrator	"Our obligation is not to define morality through religion, but to protect every student's right to believe or not believe."
T3-US	Teacher	"We teach about religions in history or world religions units, but we do not instruct students what to believe."
T5-US	Teacher	"We approach religion as we would approach any cultural system—critically, comparatively, and historically."
S4-US	Student	"We analyze different religions and how they influence societies, but it is academic, not personal."
S10-US	Student	"No one tells us which belief is correct. We learn to understand perspectives, even if we disagree."

Classroom observations showed that in the United States religion is addressed within constitutional, historical, and ethical frameworks, with teachers moderating sensitive discussions through procedural norms such as respectful listening and evidence-based reasoning. Unlike Indonesia, religion does not structure daily routines; instead, constitutional discourse shapes interactional expectations. Comparative findings indicate that constitutional design decisively positions religion within public schooling. In Indonesia, religion functions as a moral anchor

reinforced through ritual practice and curricular integration, creating coherence between constitutional mandate and lived institutional culture. In the United States, neutrality reframes religion as an object of academic and civic inquiry, anchoring civic formation in rights-based discourse rather than shared theological ethics. Thus, both systems intentionally cultivate pluralism through distinct normative pathways, namely religious ethical institutionalization in Indonesia and constitutional academic justification in the United States.

### **Institutional Mediation: Curriculum, Programs, and Policy Structures**

Institutional mediation translates constitutional design into operational practice. While constitutional regimes provide normative foundations, curriculum structures, co-curricular programs, and policy frameworks determine how these principles are enacted in daily school life.

#### ***Indonesia: Curriculum–Ritual Integration Model***

In the Indonesian public senior high schools, curriculum documents explicitly integrate objectives related to tolerance, respect, and social harmony. Analysis of lesson plans revealed explicit references to *ukhuwah insaniyah*, social responsibility, and interreligious respect. Teachers reported intentionally linking religious teachings to students' daily multicultural interactions. Classroom observations confirmed that discussions on Islamic ethics were frequently followed by reflective prompts requiring students to apply these values to real peer situations, including cooperation in group work and managing disagreement.

**Table 3.** Institutional Mediation in Indonesia

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
T2-ID	Teacher	"When we discuss <i>ukhuwah</i> , I ask students how they respect friends from other religions."
T5-ID	Teacher	"The curriculum already includes tolerance, but we must make it practical. Students need examples from their own environment."
A1-ID	Administrator	"We often coordinate with other subject teachers so that values are consistent across classes."
A3-ID	Administrator	"Religious programs are synchronized with character education. We monitor whether classroom teaching aligns with school culture."
S12-ID	Student	"Values we learn in class are repeated in morning recitation and school programs, so it feels consistent."
S15-ID	Student	"Competitions like Qur'anic recitation teach discipline and teamwork, and religion."

Co-curricular programs amplify classroom messages. Morning religious recitations, Qur'anic reading sessions during the first break, and collective prayers create habitual reinforcement. Observations documented structured supervision by teachers and orderly student participation, suggesting that ritual practice is institutionally coordinated rather than spontaneous. *Hadrah Albanjari* and Qur'anic recitation competitions cultivate discipline and collective participation. Administrators described cross-subject coordination to ensure coherence between religious instruction and broader character programs. This alignment creates continuity between formal curriculum and communal school experience.



**Figure 2.** Islamic Religious Education Learning Activities in the Classroom (Indonesia)

This figure illustrates contextual ethical discussion linking religious teaching to plural social situations. Observational data show that teachers frequently use case-based discussion, asking students to analyze scenarios involving religious difference, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Ritual reinforcement outside the classroom echoes these discussions, creating structural coherence between curriculum and institutional routine.

#### ***United States: Policy–Academic Integration Model***

In the United States public high schools, institutional mediation operates primarily through policy and academic structures rather than ritual practice. Document analysis revealed formal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) guidelines embedded in school mission statements and codes of conduct. These documents articulate principles of equality, anti-discrimination, and respect for diverse identities. Academic courses address religion within broader civic or historical themes. Classroom observations in social studies and humanities classes showed structured debates, guided inquiry, and constitutional framing of religious diversity.

**Table 4.** Institutional Mediation in the United States

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
A4-US	Administrator	“Our goal is to help students understand diversity and navigate differences respectfully.”
A6-US	Administrator	“Diversity policies guide how we respond to issues of identity and belief in school.”
T6-US	Teacher	“We connect religion to constitutional rights and civic responsibility.”
T7-US	Teacher	“Discussions are framed within historical context and supported by academic resources.”
S13-US	Student	“We have structured debates about rights and identity, but teachers make sure it stays respectful.”
S16-US	Student	“Clubs and diversity programs also help us learn about different cultures.”

Students reported participating in structured discussions, diversity initiatives, and classroom debates that address identity and cultural issues. Observations revealed explicit reference to constitutional principles such as freedom of belief and

equal protection when discussing religious topics. Teachers frequently emphasized evidence-based reasoning and turn-taking norms.



**Figure 3.** Classroom Discussion on Civic Pluralism and Constitutional Rights (United States)

The figure depicts an academic classroom in which students engage in structured discussion on civic pluralism and constitutional rights within a public school setting. Religious diversity is examined through principles such as freedom of belief, equal protection, and freedom of expression. Rather than promoting doctrine, instruction emphasizes analytical reasoning, respectful debate, and evidence-based argumentation, supported by digital academic resources that foster comparative and historical understanding. Observations indicate that institutional reinforcement operates through policy clarity and academic structure rather than ritual practice.

Comparative findings show that institutional reinforcement exists in both contexts but functions differently according to constitutional frameworks. In Indonesia, reinforcement is achieved through integration of ritual and curriculum, where ethical themes are echoed in collective recitations, congregational prayers, and character programs, creating continuity between formal instruction and daily school life. In the United States, reinforcement occurs through alignment between diversity policies and academic programming, positioning religious diversity within a civic and constitutional framework. Thus, multicultural citizenship is institutionalized through ritual and ethical coherence in Indonesia and through policy consistency and constitutional literacy in the United States.

### **Classroom Pedagogy: Normative Orientation and Dialogical Engagement**

At the pedagogical level, both systems rely heavily on dialogical engagement as the primary mechanism for cultivating multicultural citizenship, although their normative grounding differs significantly. The classroom becomes the arena where constitutional and institutional structures are translated into lived interaction.

### **Indonesia: Religious-Ethical Dialogical Framing**

In the Indonesian classrooms, normative orientation is derived from Islamic ethical principles that are explicitly framed as guiding social interaction. Classroom observations showed that teachers frequently moved from textual explanation of Qur'anic verses or *Hadith* toward applied ethical reflection. Rather than emphasizing memorization, teachers invited students to interpret religious concepts in light of everyday peer interaction, including cooperation across religious differences and management of disagreement.

**Table 5.** Dialogical Pedagogy in Indonesia

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
T1-ID	Teacher	"If students understand Islamic values correctly, they will respect anyone."
T6-ID	Teacher	"Discussion is important because students must see how Islamic ethics work in real social situations."
S4-ID	Student	"We are not just told what is right. We are asked what we think and how we would act."
S17-ID	Student	"Sometimes the teacher gives us scenarios about conflict, and we discuss how Islam teaches us to respond."
S18-ID	Student	"When we talk about tolerance, we also reflect on our own behavior toward classmates."

The teacher statements reflect a pedagogical assumption that religious ethics, when interpreted inclusively, provide a moral foundation for plural coexistence. Students confirmed that classroom activities require ethical reasoning and situational judgment rather than passive reception of doctrinal content.

Observational field notes documented sustained small-group discussion, open-ended questioning by teachers, and peer-to-peer engagement in which students articulated and reconsidered positions. Teachers intervened primarily to clarify conceptual misunderstandings or to encourage deeper reflection, not to impose unilateral conclusions. Ethical concepts such as *ukhuwah*, justice, and tolerance were contextualized within everyday school interactions. The dialogical method thus functions to reinterpret doctrinal content through lived social experience, reducing the likelihood of rigid or exclusionary interpretations. Religious norms are translated into situational reasoning embedded in plural classroom life.

### **United States: Constitutional-Deliberative Dialogical Framing**

In the United States classrooms, normative grounding is not derived from a specific religious tradition but from constitutional rights and civic equality. Observations in social studies and humanities classes revealed structured deliberation, moderated turn-taking, and explicit reference to constitutional principles when addressing religious diversity.

**Table 6.** Dialogical Pedagogy in the United States

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
T4-US	Teacher	"We encourage students to explain their reasoning and listen to others, even when they disagree."
T8-US	Teacher	"My role is to moderate the discussion, not to decide who is morally

S6-US	Student	right.” “Sometimes we debate controversial topics, but we have to stay respectful.”
S19-US	Student	“We learn how to disagree without attacking someone’s identity.”
S20-US	Student	“The teacher reminds us to use evidence and not personal attacks.”

In this context, dialogical engagement is organized around procedural norms, including reasoned argumentation, recognition of diverse perspectives, and protection of minority viewpoints. Teachers act as moderators who ensure fairness rather than authorities who impose conclusions, and when discussions become sensitive, they redirect attention to constitutional principles such as freedom of belief and equality before the law. Civic formation thus develops as deliberative competence cultivated through disciplined interaction.

Despite differing normative foundations, classroom interaction across the four schools shows clear convergence. Observations reveal mixed-group participation, attentive listening, moderated discussion, and teacher facilitation instead of authoritative control. Students are encouraged to articulate positions, engage peers, and reconsider assumptions through dialogue. This pattern indicates that dialogical pedagogy serves as the central mediating mechanism between institutional structure and civic outcomes. Although Indonesia grounds dialogue in religious ethics and the United States in constitutional pluralism, in both settings dialogue itself becomes the practical means through which multicultural citizenship is enacted and internalized in everyday classroom life.

### **Emergent Multicultural Citizenship Formation and Constraints**

Across the four schools, students’ narratives indicate that multicultural citizenship formation is not merely conceptual but experiential. It emerges gradually through repeated dialogical practice and institutional reinforcement. Civic dispositions appear to develop through sustained interaction rather than through abstract instruction alone.

#### ***Indonesia: Moral Self-Regulation and Interpersonal Sensitivity***

In the Indonesian context, students described increased sensitivity toward interreligious interaction that manifests in everyday behavior. Observations revealed that students were generally cautious in expressing potentially sensitive remarks and demonstrated cooperative interaction during mixed-group activities.

**Table 7.** Emergent Civic Formation in Indonesia

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
S5-ID	Student	“I now avoid making jokes that could hurt someone’s belief.”
S21-ID	Student	“Before, I did not think much about how my words affect others. Now I try to be more careful.”
S22-ID	Student	“Religious lessons remind us that respecting others is part of our responsibility.”
T2-ID	Teacher	“With limited hours, it is sometimes difficult to explore discussions deeply.”
T9-ID	Teacher	“Some students are more ready to reflect critically than others.”

Student statements reflect a shift from unreflective peer interaction to ethically filtered communication. They described becoming more aware that humor, language choice, and social grouping carry moral implications in a plural environment. The internalization of restraint, respect, and communal responsibility suggests that civic formation in this context is closely tied to moral self-regulation.

Religious education, reinforced through daily ritual and contextual classroom discussion, appears to cultivate a habitus of ethical caution and interpersonal awareness. However, teachers identified structural constraints that influence the depth of engagement. Limited instructional hours restrict extended deliberation, and variation in interpretive readiness means that students internalize ethical reflection at different paces. While institutional reinforcement is strong, time allocation and cognitive development shape the intensity and speed of civic internalization.

### ***United States: Deliberative Competence and Procedural Respect***

In the United States context, students articulated civic growth in terms of pluralist awareness and dialogical competence. Observations revealed structured discussion formats in which students practiced respectful disagreement and evidence-based reasoning.

**Table 8.** Emergent Civic Formation in the United States

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>
S7-US	Student	"I learned how to disagree without attacking someone's identity."
S23-US	Student	"Now I try to separate criticizing ideas from criticizing people."
S24-US	Student	"Discussions helped me understand perspectives I had never considered."
T3-US	Teacher	"We have to balance open discussion with staying neutral."
T10-US	Teacher	"Sometimes political sensitivity makes certain topics more difficult to explore deeply."

These reflections indicate that multicultural citizenship is experienced as a communicative competence. Students learn to justify claims with reasoning, respect differing perspectives, and manage disagreement constructively within a rights-based framework. In the United States context, teachers noted that maintaining institutional neutrality requires careful moderation, limiting how far normative critique can extend and emphasizing procedural regulation over substantive moral positioning.

Despite differences in normative grounding, both contexts show that multicultural citizenship develops through sustained interaction. In Indonesia, inclusivity is framed as a religious moral obligation, while in the United States it is framed as a constitutional civic responsibility. Observations across all four schools revealed cooperative discussion, attentive listening, and moderated exchange, indicating that inclusive dispositions emerge through habituated dialogical practice.

Thus, while constitutional regimes shape the language of pluralism, civic competence ultimately arises from repeated participation in structured dialogue. Constraints influence the depth and pace of development, but multicultural citizenship in both systems remains an emergent outcome of sustained pedagogical engagement rather than a simple product of policy design.

The comparative analysis therefore suggests that civic dispositions such as sensitivity, restraint, respectful disagreement, and pluralist awareness are emergent outcomes of dialogical habituation. Structural regimes condition the normative vocabulary and institutional environment, but the lived practice of inclusive interaction is forged through repeated classroom engagement. Multicultural citizenship, in both contexts, appears less as a declarative policy objective and more as an interactional competence cultivated within structured educational settings.

**Table 1.** Comparative Analytical

Analytical Dimension	Indonesia	United States
Constitutional Regime	Religion integrated into public education	Separation of church and state
Normative Foundation	Islamic ethical principles	Constitutional pluralism and civic rights
Institutional Mediation	Curriculum aligned with ritual and character programs	Diversity policies and academic pluralism
Pedagogical Strategy	Contextualized religious ethics and reflective dialogue	Evidence-based discussion and moderated debate
Structural Constraints	Limited time; varied interpretive readiness	Neutrality and political sensitivity
Observed Civic Formation	Interreligious sensitivity; communal discipline	Respectful disagreement; pluralist awareness

The cross-case findings show that multicultural citizenship formation emerges from the interaction between constitutional regime, institutional mediation, and pedagogical practice. In Indonesia, constitutional integration of religion legitimizes ethical discourse grounded in Islamic principles and reinforced through ritual and character programs. In the United States, constitutional separation limits confessional instruction but enables pluralist academic engagement framed by rights and equality.

In both contexts, dialogical pedagogy serves as the key mediating mechanism. Structured discussion and facilitated reflection cultivate inclusive dispositions beyond constitutional design alone. The evidence suggests that neither compulsory religious education nor secular neutrality inherently determines civic outcomes; rather, multicultural citizenship develops through coherent institutional reinforcement and sustained dialogical practice within distinct constitutional architectures.

## DISCUSSION

The comparative findings of this study challenge the persistent binary in global scholarship that positions religiously integrated education and secular public education as normatively opposed models of civic formation. Instead of confirming the assumption that compulsory religious education necessarily risks exclusion while secular neutrality guarantees inclusion, the evidence demonstrates that multicultural citizenship emerges through the interaction of constitutional design, institutional coherence, and dialogical pedagogy. The decisive variable is not whether religion is present or absent in public schooling, but how normative foundations are pedagogically mediated in everyday classroom interaction.

In the Indonesian, religious education is structurally authorized as a moral anchor within public schooling. Islamic Religious Education is not confined to doctrinal transmission rather it is deliberately contextualized through engagement with plural social interaction. Ethical concepts are expanded to include interreligious respect, and classroom dialogue invites students to apply religious principles to lived multicultural realities. This supports international scholarship arguing that religious education can contribute to democratic coexistence when framed dialogically and reflexively rather than confessionally (Pollefeyt, 2025; Mazur & Szauer, 2024; Firdaus et al., 2026). The present study extends this literature by providing empirical evidence from a Muslim-majority context that remains underrepresented in global comparative debates. Rather than reproducing a defensive model of identity protection, religious education in these schools operates as a civic resource that structures moral responsibility toward diversity.

At the same time, the United States cases illustrate that constitutional separation between church and state does not eliminate engagement with religion but relocates it within academic and civic discourse. Religion is approached as an object of historical, cultural, and ethical analysis, embedded within broader discussions of constitutional rights, equality, and pluralism. Students encouraged to navigate disagreement procedurally through reasoned argumentation and mutual listening. This aligns with contemporary research on democratic education, which emphasizes deliberative competence and dialogical reasoning as central to pluralist citizenship (Englund, 2022; Shaw, 2023; Leiviskä, 2023; Biesta, 2023). However, the findings also indicate that institutional neutrality can create constraints when addressing politically sensitive issues, confirming concerns that procedural regulation can limit normative depth and moral engagement (Bridgeforth & Pickett, 2026; Brewer & Young, 2025).

A key global contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that both systems exhibit institutional coherence, albeit through different modalities. In Indonesia, reinforcement occurs through the integration of curriculum with daily religious practices and coordinated character education programs. Ethical discourse is continuously echoed through communal routines, creating a form of civic habituation. In the United States, reinforcement operates through diversity frameworks, inclusive policy guidelines, and structured academic programming. Pluralism is institutionalized through procedural consistency and constitutional literacy rather than ritual practice. This comparison advances international debates by showing that institutional coherence, rather than ideological orientation, is critical for sustaining multicultural formation.

Perhaps the most significant cross-context convergence is the centrality of dialogical pedagogy. Across all four schools, teachers structured discussion, reflection, and moderated exchange rather than relying on unilateral transmission. This supports global research emphasizing dialogue as foundational to inclusive religious and civic education (Mayselless & Kizel, 2022; Desai & Wane, 2022; Bosio, 2023). The present study contributes a comparative insight by showing that dialogical pedagogy functions effectively within both religiously integrated and secular constitutional regimes. While normative vocabularies differ, the pedagogical structure of dialogue mediates civic formation in both settings. Multicultural

citizenship therefore appears as an interactional competence cultivated through repeated engagement, rather than as a direct product of macro-level policy design.

The identification of context-specific constraints further enriches global understanding. In Indonesia, limitations are primarily logistical and developmental, including restricted instructional time and varied interpretive readiness among students. In the United States, constraints stem from the need to maintain institutional neutrality amid political polarization. These differences indicate that barriers to inclusive citizenship are not inherent to religious or secular systems themselves but arise from broader structural and socio-political conditions. This finding challenges universalist assumptions in comparative education literature and underscores the importance of context-sensitive analysis (Osakwe & Onyeka Destiny, 2025; Aksakalli, 2025; Bhinder, 2025).

Theoretically, this study advances the concept of civic architectures to describe how constitutional regimes establish normative foundations while pedagogy mediates lived enactment. A religiously integrated civic architecture, as observed in Indonesia, anchors pluralism in faith-based ethical reasoning reinforced through communal practice. A secular pluralist civic architecture, as observed in the United States, anchors pluralism in constitutional rights and deliberative norms reinforced through academic and policy alignment. In both architectures, dialogical pedagogy operates as the translating mechanism that converts structural design into civic disposition. This reframing shifts comparative discourse away from ideological evaluation and toward structural-pedagogical interaction.

By integrating macro-level constitutional analysis with micro-level classroom observation, the study contributes to global debates on religion, secularism, and democratic education. It demonstrates that multicultural citizenship can be cultivated through different normative pathways, provided that institutional coherence and dialogical engagement are present. For international scholarship, this finding is significant because it broadens the analytical lens beyond Eurocentric secular paradigms and incorporates empirical insight from a Muslim-majority context. It invites scholars to reconsider simplistic dichotomies and to examine how diverse civic architectures can sustain inclusive democratic life in plural societies.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative study demonstrates that multicultural citizenship in public high schools is shaped not by the mere presence or absence of religious instruction, but by how religious education and secular pluralism are institutionally structured and pedagogically enacted. In Indonesia, where religious education is constitutionally integrated into public schooling, Islamic Religious Education functions as a moral anchor that frames plural coexistence through faith-based ethical reasoning reinforced by daily school practices. In the United States, where constitutional separation between church and state prohibits doctrinal instruction, religion is addressed within academic and civic frameworks grounded in constitutional rights and equality. The comparison reveals that both systems intentionally engage diversity, yet through distinct normative pathways. These findings challenge the long-standing assumption that secular public education is inherently more compatible with multicultural citizenship than religiously

integrated models. Instead, the study shows that dialogical pedagogy and institutional coherence exert greater influence on inclusive civic formation than constitutional orientation alone.

This study makes an original contribution by reconceptualising religious education as a mediating institutional space rather than merely a curricular subject through which secular pluralism and multicultural citizenship are negotiated across contrasting public schooling systems. Scientifically, it contributes to global debates on religious education and secular pluralism by providing a structured cross-national comparison that links macro-level constitutional regimes with micro-level classroom practice. The study strengthens existing scholarship that highlights the role of dialogical engagement in fostering inclusive citizenship while critically revisiting the assumption that religious education is normatively incompatible with democratic pluralism. By introducing and operationalizing the concept of *civic architectures* in two contrasting national contexts, the study advances comparative education theory and enriches international discourse on how public education systems cultivate multicultural citizenship. The findings reposition religious education and secular pluralism as alternative, contextually grounded civic models rather than opposing ideological extremes.

This study is limited by its focus on four public high schools within two national contexts, which constrains broad generalization across entire education systems. While the qualitative comparative design offers deep contextual insight, it does not provide large-scale statistical measurement of long-term civic outcomes. Future research should expand the comparative scope to include additional regions, school types, and national contexts to test the robustness of the identified patterns. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches would further clarify how religious education and secular pluralist frameworks shape sustained multicultural dispositions over time. Such research would strengthen global understanding of how diverse constitutional models contribute to democratic citizenship in increasingly plural societies.

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