

The Role of the KL-YES Program as a Catalyst for Intercultural Dialogue in Promoting Tolerance

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Abstract

Amid globalization and cultural polarization, the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) program emerges as a vital tool for fostering intercultural dialogue and tolerance among Indonesian youth in the US. This study aims to analyze KL-YES's role in intercultural dialogue, identify adaptation factors for Indonesian participants, and explore challenges with coping strategies. Employing a qualitative approach with phenomenology and narrative inquiry designs, the research targeted the 2025-2026 KL-YES cohort population, using purposive sampling for four key informants in New York, Colorado, Alaska, and Rochester. Data were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and documentation, analyzed through thematic analysis with manual iterative coding. Results reveal KL-YES facilitates transformative dialogue in host families and schools, dismantling stereotypes via peer social capital, shared resilience, and religious identity visibility, despite pragmatic language barriers and cultural dissonance overcome by radical transparency. In conclusion, KL-YES builds global resilience and grassroots diplomacy, validating Intergroup Contact Theory and DMIS, with recommendations for reflective pre-departure training.

Keywords: Adaptation Strategies, Intercultural Competence, Intergroup Contact, KL-YES Program, Tolerance Promotion

Abstrak

Ditengah globalisasi dan polarisasi budaya, Program Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) menjadi alat vital untuk membangun dialog antar budaya dan toleransi bagi pemuda Indonesia di AS. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis peran KL-YES dalam dialog antarbudaya, mengidentifikasi faktor adaptasi peserta Indonesia, serta mengeksplorasi tantangan dan strategi kopingnya. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi dan narrative inquiry, penelitian menargetkan populasi kohort KL-YES 2025-2026, dengan purposive sampling pada empat informan kunci di New York, Colorado, Alaska. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipan, dan dokumentasi, dianalisis dengan thematic analisis melalui pengkodean iteratif manual. Hasil menunjukkan KL-YES memfasilitasi dialog transformatif di keluarga angkat dan sekolah, meruntuhkan stereotip melalui modal sosial teman sebaya, ketahanan bersama, dan visibilitas identitas keagamaan, meskipun ada hambatan bahasa pragmatis dan disonansi budaya yang diatas dengan transparansi radikal. Kesimpulannya, KL-YES membangun ketahanan global dan diplomasi akar rumput, memvalidasi teori kontak antar kelompok dan DMIS, dengan rekomendasi untuk pra-keberangkatan yang reflektif.

Kata Kunci: Strategi Adaptasi, Kompetensi Antarbudaya, Kontak Antar Kelompok, Program KL-YES, Promosi Toleransi

INTRODUCTION

The introduction to this research stems from the phenomenon of increasing globalization and youth mobility, which has made student exchange programs a strategic instrument for public diplomacy, intercultural dialogue, and strengthening tolerance across borders. In this context, the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) program is positioned as a holistic learning ecosystem that combines formal education, community engagement, and living experiences with

host families to foster intercultural competence, empathy, and global networking among youth from Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia (Byram, 2021). Recent studies confirm that intercultural dialogue facilitated through direct contact across groups is an effective means of reducing prejudice and strengthening social cohesion amidst growing global polarization (UNESCO, 2017; El-Asri & El Karfa, 2024). From the researcher's perspective, such dialogue is more than just a verbal exchange; it serves as a crucial instrument for Indonesian students to navigate their identities while fostering mutual respect in an increasingly fragmented global society. Within this framework, KL-YES functions not only as a high school scholarship program but also as a vehicle for grassroots diplomacy that positions youth as agents of change and catalysts for global peace (Cull, 2019).

Specifically, the experiences of Indonesian students living with host families, attending American high schools, and volunteering in the local community provide a space for intensive and sustained intergroup dialogue. Previous research has shown that host family environments and school interactions are key variables in the development of intercultural competence, responsible global citizenship, and tolerance of religious, cultural, and linguistic differences. However, these experiences are also fraught with challenges such as language barriers (Jackson, 2019; Tanasy et al., 2023). The researcher personally observed that this phase is not merely a linguistic challenge but a period of profound identity negotiation, where students must find the resilience to bridge their native values with a completely new social reality. This necessitates reflective and ongoing adaptation strategies from participants (Smith & Khawaja, 2020). From my perspective, these dynamics are further complicated when participants bring visible religious identities, such as wearing the hijab. This visibility, as the researchers see it, acts as a double-edged sword: it can trigger cultural friction, yet simultaneously serves as a unique educational bridge that opens doors for genuine dialogue about diversity (Nuraeni & Setyono, 2021). In the context of KL-YES, these dynamics are further complicated when participants bring visible religious identities, such as wearing the hijab and practicing daily religious practices, which can simultaneously serve as educational bridges and points of cultural friction, triggering processes of identity negotiation and tolerance (Hopkins, 2016).

Despite this transformative potential, several issues remain prominent in the implementation of the KL-YES program for Indonesian participants. First, language barriers relate not only to basic linguistic skills but also to understanding humor, slang, and the pragmatic nuances of American English, which can lead to cognitive fatigue and social anxiety (Dewaele, 2022; Karimova et al., 2024). The researchers believe that the emotional weight of 'not being understood' is often underestimated; it requires immense mental stamina for a teenager to stay engaged when their primary tool of connection is limited. The adjustment process often begins with 'culture shock,' a state of disorientation when individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural cues (Jackson, 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2020). The researchers believe that this disorientation is not merely a psychological hurdle, but a transformative phase where participants are forced to deconstruct their previous cultural assumptions to build a more global perspective.

Second, differences in cultural expectations between participants and the host community regarding communication styles, privacy boundaries, and social customs often lead to misunderstandings that, if not managed effectively, can lead to the emergence of new stereotypes or the reinforcement of old ones (Hofstede et al., 2020). In my opinion, without effective mediation, these small cultural clashes can inadvertently reinforce old stereotypes rather than dismantle them, making the role of the participant as a 'mindful communicator' absolutely vital.

Third, the differences between Indonesia's more lecture-oriented educational system and the American school system, which emphasizes active participation, critical thinking, and independent learning, require students to make significant academic adjustments in a short period of time (Varela, 2020). The researcher argues that this shift is not just about academic grades, but about redefining one's voice in a classroom where 'silence' is no longer seen as 'respect' but as 'lack of engagement.' This gap, if not addressed, can hinder students' ability to act as confident cultural ambassadors.

Fourth, students with visible religious identities, such as those who wear the hijab or those who adhere to halal food regulations, often face unique dynamics related to the availability of prayer spaces, food that aligns with their beliefs, and environmental sensitivity to their religious practices. These challenges have the potential to trigger feelings of alienation if institutional

support and host families are inadequate, but can also serve as starting points for educational dialogue about internal diversity within Islam and religious pluralism if managed openly and reflectively (Al-Hoorie et al., 2023). Based on my observations, when host families provide environmental sensitivity, it transforms a potential point of alienation into a starting point for religious pluralism dialogue. This proves that institutional support is the backbone of a successful exchange experience.

Fifth, the existing literature is still dominated by retrospective studies focusing on alumni and long-term impacts, which tend to downplay the complex experiences of cultural friction during the program and under-capture the everyday dialogue processes that are central to the formation of tolerance (Kinging, 2009; Jackson, 2019). Furthermore, some studies are still conducted by outside researchers who rely on surveys or short interviews, thus failing to capture the emotional, nonverbal, and everyday dimensions of dialogue that can only be accessed through the perspective of participant researchers directly on-site (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Furthermore, there is limited research that explicitly links the experiences of KL-YES participants to theoretical frameworks such as Intergroup Contact Theory, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), and the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy in the context of small towns in the United States (Bennett, 2023). This theoretical gap is significant because, from the researcher's perspective, the dynamics of a small town offer a much more intensive 'cultural laboratory' for public diplomacy than large, multicultural cities.

Based on this background and gaps, this study aims to analyze the role of the KL-YES Program as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue in promoting tolerance between Indonesian students and the American community, identify the determinants that support the successful social and academic adaptation of participants, and explore the challenges they face and the coping strategies they use during the exchange year. Theoretically, this study is important because it offers a real-time analysis of the intercultural dialogue process that occurs during the program, thereby enriching the literature on student exchange, intergroup contact, and the development of intercultural competence in adolescents in developing countries (El-Asr & El Karfa, 2024; Varela, 2020). By focusing on real-time dialogue, the researcher believes this research can provide a more grounded and honest look at how young Indonesians actually evolve into global citizens. In terms of novelty, this study combines phenomenology and narrative inquiry approaches with the researcher's position as a KL-YES 2025–2026 participant, thus providing an insider perspective on how daily interactions in host families, schools, local communities, and even with institutional actors such as state senators operationalize the theories of intergroup contact, DMIS, and soft power in practice (Creswell, 2013; Bennett, 1993). Practically, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of pre-departure training strategies, strengthening support for host families and schools, and designing more effective youth-based public diplomacy policies in promoting interfaith and cultural tolerance (Cull, 2019; Byram, 2021).

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a combined phenomenological and narrative inquiry design appropriate for exploring the subjective experiences of KL-YES Program participants in promoting intercultural dialogue and tolerance through Indonesian student exchange in the United States. Phenomenology was used to explore the deeper meanings of participants' lived experiences related to cultural adaptation, cross-cultural interactions, and the development of tolerance (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This design is essential because it allows the researcher to go beyond surface-level descriptions and capture the 'essence' of what it truly feels like to be an Indonesian student in a foreign environment. Meanwhile, narrative inquiry was integrated to capture the personal stories and adaptation journeys of participants, host families, and program stakeholders (Barkhuizen, 2020). The researchers believe that by combining these two, the research doesn't just present data, but breathes life into the participants' struggles and triumphs. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles that emphasize in-depth interpretation of complex social phenomena, as outlined in a flexible and iterative qualitative methodology framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The combination of the two designs allows for triangulation of perspectives to strengthen the validity of the findings, particularly in the context of real-time experiences during the exchange year running from August 2025 to January 2026 in Watertown, New York.

Data collection instruments included in-depth semi-structured interviews with KL-YES participants from the 2025–2026 cohort, the researchers' host families, public officials such as senators, and American peers with whom they interacted directly; participant observation in schools, host families, and community activities; and documentation of official program reports and study literature. Data analysis techniques employed thematic analysis to identify key patterns of intercultural dialogue, using coding processes supported by data triangulation to ensure academic rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher chooses this systematic approach to ensure that every theme emerged authentically from the data rather than from my personal assumptions. Furthermore, validation of findings was conducted through member checking and peer debriefing to mitigate researcher bias as a participant (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher argues that as an 'insider' researcher, these validation steps are critical to maintaining objectivity while still honoring the subjective depth of the experience.

The study population consisted of all Indonesian KL-YES Program participants from the 2025–2026 cohort who underwent a one-year exchange in the United States, focusing on their experiences in states such as New York, Colorado, Alaska, and Rochester. The sample was selected through purposive sampling to recruit four key informants: the researcher as the primary participant in Watertown, New York; Research as the primary participant in Watertown, New York (participant 1), one female participant in Colorado (Participant 2); one male participant in Alaska (Participant 3); and one participant in Rochester, New York (Participant 4), selected based on criteria of similar adaptation experiences, visibility of religious identity, and active engagement in intercultural dialogue. This sampling strategy ensured data saturation and representation of diverse experiences, in accordance with the principle of purposive sampling in qualitative research, which targets informative informants to answer the research questions in depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By selecting participants from diverse locations like Alaska, Colorado, and New York it is vital to show that while the environment changes, the core journey of identity negotiation remains a shared experience among Indonesian youth. This small but intensive sample size is optimal for a narrative-phenomenological design that prioritizes depth over quantity (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

The procedure started from the pre-research stage with preliminary studies and ethical preparations, followed by primary data collection from August 7, 2025, through audio-recorded interviews (45–90 minutes per session), participant observation with daily field notes, as well as secondary documents such as ECA and American Councils reports. The raw data were then transcribed and analyzed iteratively with manual thematic coding, through repeated cycles of data reduction until saturation was reached in January 2026. The process concluded with the interpretation of findings, triangulation validation, and the preparation of the final report integrating narratives with theoretical frameworks such as the Intergroup Contact Theory and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. All stages adhered to research ethics through informed consent, respondent anonymity, and IRB approval, ensuring the integrity and reliability of the results (Israel & Hay, 2024; Punch, 2014). The researchers believe that maintaining strict ethical standards is not just a formal requirement, but a moral obligation to protect the personal narratives and vulnerabilities shared by my fellow participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Contribution of The KL-YES Program to Intercultural Dialogue and Tolerance

The research findings reveal that the KL-YES program serves as a multifaceted catalyst for dialogue, functioning across domestic, social, and institutional spheres. A primary finding of this study is that dialogue is most transformative when it occurs within the private sphere—specifically within the host family and shared living spaces. A unique dimension of the researcher's experience in Watertown, New York, was the double placement dynamic with an exchange student from Uzbekistan. Although both participants share the same Islamic faith, they represent vastly different cultural and theological interpretations. The researcher's roommate does not wear the hijab and adheres to a different school of thought, creating a continuous intra-faith dialogue within the household.

This living arrangement served as a powerful educational tool for the host family and the local community, demonstrating that Islam is not a monolithic entity but a diverse tapestry of traditions. By observing two Muslim students with different practices living in harmony, the host

community moved beyond tolerance (mere coexistence) toward intercultural appreciation. Furthermore, as the only student wearing a hijab in her high school, the researcher becomes a visible living textbook. Daily inquiries regarding the hijab, fasting during Ramadan, and the exclusion of Western holidays like Christmas or Halloween were navigated through patient, consistent dialogue. These interactions successfully replaced media-driven stereotypes with nuanced, human connections, proving that visible religious identity, when paired with open communication, acts as an aggressive catalyst for dismantling prejudice.

On an institutional level, the dialogue was validated by Senator Mark Walczyk. During a formal inquiry regarding the socio-cultural role of exchange students, the Senator emphasized that diversity is a cornerstone of community enrichment, bringing a world perspective to local American districts. His direct address to the researcher, "You are an ambassador of your country; you represent your country here, highlighting the gravity of the student's role." This suggests that the KL-YES program achieves Public Diplomacy not through policy papers but through the physical presence and voice of students who humanize their nations in the eyes of American policymakers and citizens alike.



Figure 1. The researcher in a dialogue with New York State Senator Mark Walczyk

Determinant Factors Facilitating Participants' Adaptation to the Social and Educational Environment

The researcher's successful transition into the Watertown community was not accidental but was facilitated by several critical determining factors. Initially, the researcher experienced significant socio-cultural apprehension, rooted in the fear that her visible religious identity might lead to isolation in a predominantly Western secular school system. However, the following factors were instrumental in her adaptation:



Figure 2. The researcher's academic immersion: Engaging with American peers in a classroom setting to foster mutual understanding.

1. **Peer-Mediated Social Capital:** The formation of a close-knit group of American friends provided the researcher with social capital. These peers acted as cultural bridges, interpreting local slang, social cues, and academic expectations that were not found in textbooks. Their proactive inclusiveness allowed the researcher to lower her Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982), which is essential for both linguistic and cultural acquisition.
2. **Shared Resilience in Double Placement:** The presence of the Uzbek roommate, despite their theological differences, provided a unique psychological anchor. The shared experience of being another in an American high school created a bond of collective resilience. Negotiating their internal differences as Muslims while simultaneously adapting to American culture equipped the researcher with a more sophisticated level of intercultural maturity.
3. **Proactive Host Family Engagement:** The host family's non-judgmental curiosity created a psychologically safe environment. By treating the researcher's religious requirements (such as prayer times and dietary restrictions) with respect rather than as an inconvenience, they empowered the researcher to maintain her core identity while exploring her new American identity.



Figure 3. The researcher with the Host Family and double placement. Representing the core of intergroup contact and cultural exchange at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, the intercultural dialogue is extended into the private sphere of the host family. Being the first Muslim exchange student in their home, the researcher's religious practices—such as performing the five daily prayers (Salat) and wearing the hijab—became central topics of curiosity. These daily interactions allowed for deep, informal discussions where the researcher provided logical explanations regarding the concepts of modesty and spiritual discipline. This process transformed the host parents' initial curiosity into profound respect, proving that the domestic environment is a crucial space for grassroots diplomacy where theological barriers are dismantled through mutual understanding.

Challenges Encountered by Participants and Coping Mechanisms

In accordance with the W-Curve Model of Adaptation, the researcher navigated a period of Culture Shock characterized by significant psychological and linguistic hurdles. These challenges were essential for the identity renegotiation that defines the exchange experience.

1. **The Pragmatic Linguistic Barrier:** Beyond basic English proficiency, the researcher faced a pragmatic gap—the difficulty of understanding American humor, sarcasm, and the high-context slang used by teenagers in upstate New York. This results in cognitive fatigue, where the mental energy required to process daily social interactions leads to periods of exhaustion.
2. **Collectivist-Individualist Dissonance:** Coming from a deeply collectivist Indonesian culture—rooted in the philosophy of Gotong Royong—the researcher initially found the American emphasis on individualism and personal privacy to be alienating. The social distance inherent in Western interactions was initially perceived as a lack of warmth, requiring a significant shift in the researcher's cultural perception to understand it as a form of mutual respect for boundaries.
3. **Navigating Religious Identity in a Secular High School:** Being the only student who wears a

hijab means that the researcher's religious practices were always public. The challenge of finding time and space for Salah (prayer) and navigating social events centered around unfamiliar holidays required constant negotiation and a high level of cultural stamina



Figure 4. The researcher with fellow KL-YES participants from diverse countries, demonstrating how building international friendships acts as a primary strategy to overcome cultural barriers and foster mutual understanding.

Coping Mechanisms: To mitigate these challenges, the researcher employed a Reflexive Adaptation Strategy. This involved Radical Transparency, where the researcher chose to be vocal about her confusion or discomfort rather than retreating into silence. By explaining why certain interactions felt difficult, she allowed her host family and friends to participate in her adaptation process. Additionally, the researcher maintained her spiritual practices as a source of internal consistency. Rather than using her faith as a barrier, she used it as a bridge, inviting others to observe and ask questions, and also actively joining every community and school activity, thereby transforming a potential challenge into a successful moment of intercultural dialogue. This resilience confirms that the KL-YES program does not just provide a cultural visit; it builds global grit and a sophisticated, tolerant worldview.

Comparative Perspectives Across Participants (2025/2026)

To enrich the narrative and ensure a comprehensive analysis, this research incorporates data from three other KL-YES awardees (2025/2026 cohort). To maintain research ethics and confidentiality, these individuals are referred to as Participant 1 (stationed in Colorado), Participant 2 (Alaska), and Participant 3 (Rochester, NY).

1. Deconstructing Systematic Stereotypes through Personal Experience

A significant commonality among all participants was the presence of pre-departure anxiety fueled by media portrayals of the United States. Participant 2, stationed in Alaska, specifically highlighted a profound fear regarding the American political landscape and the potential for racial hierarchy or hate speech, asking a central question of personal safety: "Will The researcher be safe?" Similarly, Participant 3 expressed concerns over crime rates and systemic racism often highlighted in international news.

However, the transition from fear to belonging occurred rapidly through direct contact. Participant 1 noted that her initial worries about language barriers and social isolation were dismantled within the first month by the outgoing and inclusive nature of her American peers. This collective evidence suggests that the KL-YES program acts as a powerful deconstruction tool; it replaces generalized, often negative, media-driven stereotypes with nuanced, positive human realities.

2. Religious Identity as a Catalyst for Educational Dialogue

The research identifies that religious visibility—specifically the hijab and dietary laws—serves as the most frequent entry point for intercultural dialogue. Participant 1, much like the researcher, navigated her journey as the only student who wore a hijab in her school. She described her role as a living resource for her peers, where her presence naturally prompted questions that allowed her to meld religious education with social interaction.

Furthermore, Participant 2 and Participant 3 both navigated the complexities of Halal food in social settings. Participant 2 emphasized that his refusal to consume certain foods was not an

act of social rejection but a moment for theological clarification. Participant 3 admitted to initial awkwardness when being provided with special accommodations, yet acknowledged that these moments forced a dialogue that led to mutual respect. These comparisons prove that being different is not a barrier to integration, but rather the very catalyst that makes meaningful dialogue possible.

3. The Evolution of Tolerance through Cultural Dissonance

The participants experienced varying degrees of culture shock, from social habits to deep-seated values. Participant 2 experienced significant dissonance regarding Public Displays of Affection (PDA), which contrasted sharply with the conservative social norms prevalent in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Participant 3 observed different perspectives on domestic cohabitation.

Despite these shocks, the participants reported a significant increase in their own tolerance levels. Participant 2 beautifully articulated that being celebrated by his American friends, despite his differing beliefs and background, taught him to view diversity as something beautiful rather than a source of conflict. Participant 1 echoed this, noting that living in a freer environment compared to Indonesia allowed her to develop a more open-minded and balanced personality. This proves that the exchange experience fosters a Global Mindset where participants learn to respect different cultural logics without compromising their own values.

Synthesis of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

This section integrates the empirical data gathered from the researcher and the three participants with the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, providing a scholarly synthesis of the research objectives.

1. Validation of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954)

The research findings provide strong empirical support for Allport's theory, particularly the condition of Support of researchercities. This was exemplified by the researcher's high-level dialogue with Senator Mark Walczyk, which provided institutional legitimacy to the program. Similarly, Participant 1's experience with school counselors providing dedicated prayer spaces reflects an institutional sanction of her identity. When students feel that their identity is recognized by local researchercities, the quality of their Intergroup Contact improves, leading to a significant reduction in prejudice and an increase in mutual trust.

2. Mapping Progress on the DMIS Scale (Bennett, 2017)

The narrative inquiry reveals a collective movement along the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). All participants initially entered the US in a state of Defense (characterized by fear of racism or political hostility). However, through the Reflexive Adaptation Strategy and continuous dialogue, they transitioned toward Adaptation. In this stage, as seen in Participant 2's reflection, differences are no longer perceived as threats but as enrichments. The awkwardness reported by Participant 3 is a classic symptom of the transition from Minimization to Acceptation, where the student acknowledges the depth of cultural difference and chooses to engage with it empathetically.

3. The KL-YES Participant as a Strategic Soft Power Asset (Nye, 2004)

Finally, the research concludes that each participant functions as a vital instrument of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy. By being Ambassadors (a term explicitly used by Senator Walczyk), these students engage in Attraction-based Diplomacy. Instead of formal government propaganda, the US and Indonesia built relations through the human face of these students. By correcting misconceptions about Islam and Indonesian culture through daily listening and sharing, the participants have successfully constructed a sustainable framework for international peace at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study found that the KL-YES Program acted as a powerful catalyst for intercultural dialogue through intensive interactions in host families, schools, and local communities, significantly increasing tolerance between Indonesian and American students by transforming stereotypes into mutual understanding. Determinants of adaptation included emotional support from host families, social capital from peers, and shared resilience among participants, while challenges such as pragmatic language barriers, collectivist-individualist dissonance, and visibility of religious identity were addressed through reflective adaptation strategies based on

radical transparency and spiritual practices as bridges to dialogue. These findings validate Intergroup Contact Theory, DMIS, and soft power as effective frameworks for youth exchange.

However, limitations of the study lie in the small sample size focused on the 2025-2026 cohort in a limited location such as Watertown, New York, so the results may not be generalizable to other states or different cohorts, as well as potential bias due to the researcher's position as a participant. Suggestions for future research include longitudinal alumni studies for long-term impact, comparisons with other countries of origin, and mixed-methods approaches to measure quantitative changes in intercultural competence. Practical implications of the study recommend strengthening pre-departure training based on reflective strategies, institutional support for religious identity, and collaboration between ECA-American Councils and Indonesian schools to optimize grassroots diplomacy.

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