



**NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AS A  
PATHWAY TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: EVIDENCE  
FROM AN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH SEMINAR**

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**Abstract:**

Non-formal education is increasingly recognised as a promising space for addressing complex social issues that require dialogue, reflexivity, and relational learning. Among these, interfaith dialogue occupies a particularly significant place in contemporary plural societies. This article investigates the contribution of non-formal education to interfaith dialogue through the evaluation of an international seminar designed for youth professionals. The study draws on evidence from the 3-day "Power of Interfaith Dialogue" seminar, which engaged 26 participants from 17 countries representing diverse professional, cultural, and belief backgrounds. Based on participant evaluation data, the article examines how non-formal education methodologies shaped the learning experience and supported the development of knowledge, attitudes, and competences relevant to interfaith engagement. The findings suggest that participants perceived the seminar as highly valuable for supporting mutual understanding, openness to diverse perspectives, interpersonal dialogue skills, and perceived readiness for future action. Participants emphasised the importance of experiential and dialogical methods, the opportunity for self-reflection, and the exchange of practices across contexts. At the same time, the evaluation revealed a need for more time to process complex issues and for greater exposure to local interfaith initiatives. The article concludes that non-formal education can function as a meaningful pathway to interfaith dialogue by creating

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conditions for reflective encounter and by equipping youth professionals to promote inclusion, peacebuilding, and religious diversity in their own communities.

**Keywords:** non-formal education; interfaith dialogue; youth professionals; seminar evaluation; religious diversity; transformative learning

## 1. Introduction

Non-formal education has increasingly been recognised as a valuable pedagogical field for addressing complex social challenges that require participation, dialogue, reflexivity, and experiential engagement rather than the mere transmission of information. In contrast to more rigid instructional settings, non-formal learning environments are often better positioned to cultivate relational understanding, learner agency, and collaborative meaning-making, particularly when the subject matter involves identity, values, diversity, and social coexistence (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Karachalios, 2024; Kong, 2021). These characteristics make non-formal education especially relevant for interfaith dialogue, a field that depends not only on knowledge about religions and worldviews but also on the development of communicative openness, empathy, critical self-awareness, and the capacity to engage constructively across difference (Halsall & Roebben, 2006; Larkins & Owen, 2025; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021).

In contemporary plural societies, the educational importance of interfaith dialogue has become more pronounced. Growing religious and worldview diversity, intensified public polarisation, persistent stereotypes, and exclusionary social narratives have increased the need for educational processes that support democratic coexistence and respectful engagement among people with different beliefs and backgrounds. Recent scholarship has therefore argued that interfaith dialogue should not be treated solely as a theological, political, or civic concern, but also as a distinctly educational one, since meaningful dialogue across religious difference requires pedagogical conditions that foster listening, reflection, mutual recognition, and informed encounter (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Larkins & Owen, 2025; Quirós Domínguez *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Within this context, non-formal education appears particularly well-suited to the aims of interfaith learning. Its emphasis on voluntary participation, experiential processes, co-construction of knowledge, and reflection can create conditions in which dialogue is not reduced to abstract tolerance discourse, but becomes a lived educational practice grounded in encounter and reciprocity. This is important because interfaith dialogue is not merely about acquiring information on religious traditions. It also involves negotiating identity, worldview, trust, prejudice, positionality, and power in interpersonal and group settings. Educational responses to such issues must therefore move beyond content delivery and foster spaces in which participants can examine assumptions, engage with difference, and develop dispositions and competences for inclusive coexistence (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Quirós Domínguez *et al.*, 2023; Vilà *et al.*, 2020).

This argument is consistent with broader educational literature showing that active, learner-centred, and dialogical approaches are associated with deeper engagement, stronger ownership of learning, and more sustained attitudinal development. Experiential learning has been linked to increased classroom engagement, motivation, and meaningful participation, while transformative learning scholarship has highlighted the importance of critical reflection and relational learning in processes of perspective change and socially oriented education (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Kong, 2021). Comparable patterns also emerge in empirical studies from environmental and sustainability education, where participatory and reflective educational interventions have been associated with positive changes in awareness, attitudes, self-efficacy, and perceived readiness for action (Karachalios *et al.*, 2023, 2026; Karachalios & Tantaroudas, 2025). Although these studies concern different thematic fields, they reinforce a broader pedagogical proposition that is directly relevant to the present article: educational programmes tend to become more impactful when they integrate cognitive, affective, and practice-oriented dimensions rather than privileging information acquisition alone.

At the same time, the empirical literature on interfaith dialogue still presents an important gap. Although there is growing interest in the educational dimensions of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, studies focusing specifically on non-formal education remain relatively limited. Even fewer studies examine structured learning activities designed for youth professionals or youth workers, despite the fact that these practitioners often work directly with religious, cultural, and worldview diversity in community-based contexts (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024; Visser, Liefbroer, *et al.*, 2023). This gap matters because these professional groups often operate in plural, community-based, and relational environments where facilitation skills, diversity management, and the ability to transfer learning into practice are especially important.

Furthermore, embedding interreligious and intercultural dialogue within non-formal education is particularly important because religion and worldviews are often insufficiently addressed in educational settings. Practitioners may hesitate to engage with these topics because they are unsure how to approach sensitive questions of faith, belief, identity, and belonging in an inclusive and respectful manner. As a result, religion and worldviews may be avoided in educational practice, even though they strongly influence everyday life, value systems, social relationships, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. Addressing these dimensions within non-formal educational contexts can therefore contribute to reflective dialogue, mutual understanding, and social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Vilà *et al.*, 2020; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Recent work has explicitly pointed out that leisure-time and non-formal education constitute an underexplored yet highly promising field for addressing religious diversity through participatory educational means (Essomba *et al.*, 2023). Likewise, the available review literature suggests that interfaith initiatives may support knowledge, communication skills, and appreciation for other worldviews, but that the field still needs

more empirical studies capable of clarifying which educational designs and pedagogical conditions produce meaningful outcomes (Visser *et al.*, 2024).

The present article addresses this gap by examining the educational contribution of the 3-day "Power of Interfaith Dialogue" seminar, an international learning activity designed for youth professionals. Drawing on participant evaluation data, the article investigates how non-formal education methodologies shaped the seminar experience, what participants perceived as its principal learning outcomes, and which elements were considered particularly effective or in need of improvement. Rather than treating interfaith dialogue as an abstract normative principle, the article approaches it as a situated educational process unfolding within a structured non-formal learning environment. In doing so, it seeks to contribute empirical evidence to the growing discussion on how non-formal education can support interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding, and inclusive youth work in culturally and religiously diverse contexts (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

The study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How did participants evaluate the contribution of the seminar to their understanding and practice of interfaith dialogue?

**RQ2:** Which non-formal education methodologies were perceived as most meaningful in supporting learning, reflection, and participation?

**RQ3:** What challenges, limitations, and follow-up intentions emerged from the evaluation data?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the literature on interfaith dialogue as an educational practice and to wider debates on the role of non-formal learning in fostering inclusive, dialogical, and socially transformative forms of youth work.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Non-formal Education as a Dialogical and Experiential Learning Space

Non-formal education has been widely recognised as a pedagogical field particularly suited to socially complex, value-laden, and relationally demanding themes, because it typically privileges participation, dialogue, reflection, and experiential engagement over the one-directional transmission of content. In contrast to more rigid instructional frameworks, non-formal learning environments often create conditions for learner agency, shared meaning-making, and the active negotiation of ideas and identities. These characteristics are especially important when the educational aim extends beyond cognitive acquisition and includes attitudinal development, relational understanding, and the capacity to act constructively in diverse social settings. Recent research has shown that experiential learning is associated with higher levels of student motivation and classroom engagement, while transformative learning scholarship has further emphasised the role of critical reflection, relational encounter, and perspective

transformation in socially oriented educational processes (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Kong, 2021).

This broader pedagogical logic is also supported by studies from adjacent educational fields. Research in environmental and sustainability education suggests that active, reflective, experiential, and learner-centred interventions can strengthen awareness, engagement, perceived competence, self-efficacy, and readiness for action, even when applied in different thematic domains. Although these studies do not address interfaith dialogue directly, they support the wider pedagogical proposition that educational interventions become more meaningful when they combine cognitive, affective, participatory, and practice-oriented dimensions within a structured learning process (Karachalios *et al.*, 2023, 2026; Karachalios & Manesis, 2025; Karachalios & Tantaroudas, 2025).

## **2.2 Interfaith Dialogue as an Educational Process**

Within increasingly plural societies, interfaith dialogue has gradually come to be understood not only as a theological, political, or civic concern, but also as a distinctly educational one. Religious, spiritual, and worldview diversity requires educational approaches capable of fostering respectful encounter, communicative openness, and the ability to engage meaningfully across difference.

Interreligious dialogue can be differentiated into several complementary forms, each addressing different dimensions of encounter and exchange between individuals and communities of diverse religious backgrounds. A useful distinction refers to everyday interpersonal encounter, joint action, theological or religious exchange, and the sharing of religious or spiritual experience. These interconnected forms show that interreligious dialogue is not a single method, but a multidimensional process through which mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence, and constructive relationships can be cultivated in plural societies (Swidler, 2014; Visser, Liefbroer, *et al.*, 2023).

The first form, often referred to as the dialogue of life, takes place within everyday coexistence, such as in schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, sports activities, and community settings. In this form of dialogue, the emphasis lies on peaceful coexistence, shared human values, and interpersonal relationships, while religious identity may remain implicit rather than explicitly discussed. The dialogue of life can therefore strengthen social cohesion and mutual understanding through ordinary interaction and represents one of the most accessible forms of interreligious engagement.

A second form is the dialogue of joint action, in which individuals and communities from different religious traditions cooperate in addressing social, ecological, or humanitarian challenges for the common good. Such initiatives demonstrate how shared ethical concerns can create opportunities for collaboration across religious boundaries. Contemporary examples include interfaith environmental or social justice movements, in which religious actors work collectively toward common societal goals.

The third form, the dialogue of religious and theological exchange, is typically conducted by individuals with substantial theological or religious expertise. This form of dialogue focuses on discussing and critically reflecting upon religious teachings, traditions, and practices. Its purpose is not to achieve religious conversion, but rather to explore similarities, differences, and possible contradictions between belief systems in an open and honest manner. Through such exchanges, participants contribute to deeper theological understanding and mutual respect between religious traditions.

Finally, the dialogue of religious and spiritual experience centres on the sharing of personal spiritual practices and experiences, including prayer, contemplation, meditation, or expressions of faith. Participants engage with one another from within their respective religious traditions while reflecting on the existential and spiritual dimensions of human life.

Taken together, these forms show that interreligious dialogue cannot be reduced to a single model or method. It may occur through everyday coexistence, shared social action, theological exchange, or the sharing of spiritual experience. Across these forms, however, the broader educational aim remains the cultivation of peaceful coexistence, constructive relationships, mutual recognition, and the capacity to engage difference without reducing it to conflict or mere tolerance. Non-formal educational settings can support this aim by providing participatory, experience-based, and relational learning environments in which participants develop communicative competences, empathy, and reflective capacities for engaging with religious and cultural diversity (Halsall & Roebben, 2006; Swidler, 2014; Visser, Liebroer, *et al.*, 2023).

From this perspective, interfaith learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of information about religions. It also involves listening, reflexivity, self-examination, ethical engagement, and the development of capacities for coexistence in contexts marked by diversity, tension, and sometimes asymmetry of power. Mayhew's theory of interfaith learning and development is especially relevant here, as it conceptualises interfaith engagement as a developmental and educational process shaped by encounter, identity, relationships, and reflection. Related work in religious education similarly argues that dialogue is not peripheral to education in plural societies but central to it (Halsall & Roebben, 2006; Larkins & Owen, 2025; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021).

The empirical literature on interfaith initiatives provides growing support for this position. A recent systematic literature review of interfaith initiatives concluded that such initiatives can positively influence participants' knowledge of other worldviews, communication skills, and appreciation of religious diversity, although the evidence base remains methodologically uneven and often relies on self-reported outcomes. A related scoping review further showed that interfaith learning objectives span cognitive, attitudinal, relational, and action-oriented dimensions, but that the field still lacks sufficiently shared and robust frameworks for assessing them across contexts. These findings suggest that interfaith learning is a multidimensional educational phenomenon and that its evaluation requires attention not only to what participants know, but also to

how they relate, reflect, communicate, and transfer learning into practice (Visser *et al.*, 2024; Visser, Liefbroer, *et al.*, 2023).

Research focusing more specifically on educators and young people further strengthens the case for examining interfaith dialogue through educational lenses. Essomba, Nadeu, and Tarres Vallespi argue that non-formal and leisure-time education remain underexplored in interfaith dialogue scholarship despite their clear relevance for addressing religious diversity in participatory ways. Their study points to the importance of training, policy support, and pedagogical intentionality if interfaith dialogue is to become a meaningful educational practice. Similarly, studies on interreligious competence and on intercultural and interreligious competences among youth indicate that educational preparedness for engaging with religious diversity cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it must be cultivated through structured opportunities for reflection, interaction, and dialogue (Aneas *et al.*, 2024; Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Quirós Domínguez *et al.*, 2023; Vilà *et al.*, 2020).

### **2.3 Non-formal Education, Youth Professionals, and the Empirical Gap**

Despite the conceptual compatibility between non-formal education and interfaith dialogue, empirical research focusing specifically on non-formal learning settings remains comparatively limited. This is an important omission, because non-formal education appears particularly well suited to themes that involve identity, worldview, prejudice, trust, and coexistence. Its emphasis on voluntary participation, peer exchange, dialogical methods, and reflective facilitation can create conditions in which interfaith dialogue is experienced as a lived process rather than discussed only as an abstract principle. Yet relatively few studies have examined how such processes unfold in structured seminar or training contexts, especially those addressed to youth professionals or youth workers (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024; Visser, Liefbroer, *et al.*, 2023).

This gap is especially relevant in the context of youth work. Youth professionals frequently operate in diverse and community-based environments in which they are expected to manage difference, facilitate participation, support inclusion, and respond constructively to tensions linked to identity and belonging. For this reason, training initiatives in interfaith dialogue may have significance not only for personal learning, but also for professional practice and community transfer. Existing case-based and review-based research suggests that interfaith programmes can support learning, broaden understandings of diversity, and encourage willingness to engage across difference. However, such outcomes depend strongly on programme design, facilitation quality, and opportunities for reflection and dialogue. Contact alone is not sufficient; educational intentionality matters (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser, Moyaert, *et al.*, 2023).

The present article responds to this gap by examining the educational contribution of the 3-day "Power of Interfaith Dialogue" seminar, an international learning activity designed for youth professionals. By analysing participant evaluation data, the study investigates how non-formal education methodologies shaped the seminar experience,

which learning outcomes were perceived as most important, and which elements participants identified as particularly effective or in need of improvement. In doing so, the article contributes empirical evidence to a growing but still insufficiently developed field of research concerning the role of non-formal education in fostering interfaith dialogue, inclusive youth work, and socially transformative learning in culturally and religiously diverse contexts (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

### 3. Material and Methods

#### 3.1 Study Design

This study adopted an exploratory evaluation design based on qualitative description and descriptive analysis of post-seminar participant feedback. The purpose was not to establish causal effectiveness in an experimental sense, but to examine how participants experienced the seminar, which learning outcomes they perceived as most meaningful, and how they assessed the relevance of the non-formal education methodologies that structured the learning process. Such a design is appropriate when the aim is to remain analytically close to participants' reported experiences while producing a practice-oriented account of educational processes in applied settings (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010).

More specifically, the study can be understood as a research-oriented secondary analysis of programme evaluation material. Secondary qualitative analysis is increasingly recognised as a legitimate methodological strategy when existing datasets are revisited to address new or more analytically focused research questions, provided that the origin, purpose, and limitations of the original material are made explicit (Irvine, 2024). In the present case, the evaluation data were initially generated for seminar quality assurance and improvement, but they also offered a valuable empirical basis for examining how non-formal education operated in practice within an interfaith learning setting.

#### 3.2 Context and Setting

The study focused on the 3-day "Power of Interfaith Dialogue" seminar, organised within the SALTO Inclusion & Diversity "Embracing Diversity" series. According to the seminar documentation, the activity was designed to empower youth professionals with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to foster interfaith dialogue and promote mutual understanding, inclusion, and peacebuilding in their own contexts. The broader educational logic of the seminar was thus aligned with evaluation approaches that view educational programmes not simply in terms of content delivery, but in terms of their capacity to create meaningful learning conditions and support intended developmental outcomes.

The seminar report identifies four main objectives: to support a better understanding of what interfaith dialogue is and is not; to encourage reflection on personal systems of belief, structural issues, and organisational practices; to facilitate the

exchange of strategies and practices related to community building and peacebuilding; and to strengthen anti-discriminatory behaviours among youth professionals. These aims positioned the seminar as a structured non-formal learning process integrating conceptual, relational, and action-oriented dimensions.

### **3.3 Participants**

The seminar brought together 26 professionals from 17 countries who worked directly with young people in a variety of roles, including youth workers, youth leaders, teachers, coaches, social and health workers, and employment officers. The report also indicates that participants represented diverse religious, spiritual, and non-religious orientations, including believers, atheists, doubters, and seekers. This diversity was not incidental, but central to the educational design of the seminar, as interfaith dialogue depends on meaningful encounter among participants with different backgrounds, experiences, and belief positions.

A total of 25 participants completed the post-seminar evaluation form, representing a very high response rate in relation to the total number of attendees. Although the study does not claim statistical generalisability, the high level of participation in the evaluation strengthens the descriptive value of the dataset and supports its use as a basis for analysing the perceived educational contribution of the seminar.

### **3.4 Educational Methodologies and Data Collection**

The seminar was explicitly grounded in non-formal education methodologies. According to the evaluation report, the programme combined ice-breaking activities, trust-building exercises, expectation-sharing, group work, reflective sessions, dialogical tasks, legal and conceptual exploration, encounters with faith representatives, and experiential activities focused on identity, privilege, diversity, prejudice, and community building. Examples included the Name Game, Expectations-Fears-Contributions, a pedagogical contract, Stickers in the Back, agree/disagree activities, a World Cafe with local faith representatives, Take a Step Forward, Identity Flower, and the development of strategies and action plans. Reflection moments were embedded throughout the programme, and participant feedback was used formatively to adjust the learning process where necessary.

This mix of experiential, dialogical, and reflective activities is consistent with learner-centred educational design, especially in contexts where the goals of education include not only knowledge acquisition but also self-reflection, perspective-taking, interpersonal engagement, and future transfer into practice (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Kong, 2021; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021). In methodological terms, evaluation studies of this kind are particularly suited to qualitative description because they seek to capture how participants understand and interpret the value of an educational intervention in real-world conditions rather than to isolate narrowly defined causal effects (Sandelowski, 2000).

The data for the present article were drawn from the post-seminar evaluation report. The dataset included descriptive information on overall satisfaction, satisfaction with learning outcomes, appreciation of the methodologies used, critical reflections on limitations, and intended follow-up actions. It also included anonymised participant comments that illustrated how the seminar was experienced and what participants considered most valuable. The dataset therefore combined aggregated quantitative indicators with qualitative feedback, making it suitable for an interpretive descriptive analysis of educational contribution.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The analysis followed an interpretive process combining descriptive synthesis of the reported evaluation findings with thematic reading of participant comments. In a first stage, the descriptive elements of the evaluation were identified and organised, including indicators related to overall satisfaction, satisfaction with learning outcomes, appreciation of methodologies, and confidence regarding follow-up implementation. In a second stage, the qualitative comments were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes concerning educational value, pedagogical strengths, limitations, and perceived transferability to participants' professional contexts. This approach enabled the integration of numerical indicators with participants' own words and interpretations.

Although the dataset was not generated through in-depth interviews or focus groups, a thematic analytic logic was considered appropriate for identifying patterned meaning across the available qualitative material. The analysis was informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, particularly the emphasis on repeated engagement with the dataset, pattern recognition, and interpretive theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2019). At the same time, because the qualitative comments were relatively brief and embedded within a programme evaluation format, the level of interpretation remained descriptive and practice-oriented. This combination is consistent with qualitative description, which seeks to provide a rich but low-inference account of participants' experiences and meanings (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010).

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The study relied on anonymised and aggregated programme evaluation material. No personal identifiers were included in the dataset analysed, and all qualitative excerpts were used anonymously. Because the material originated as post-seminar evaluation data collected for quality-improvement purposes and was later revisited through a research-oriented lens, the ethical risk to participants was limited. Nevertheless, the secondary use of evaluation material requires transparency regarding the origin of the dataset, the limits of the available material, the absence of personal identifiers, and the protection of anonymity (Irvine, 2024).

A methodological limitation linked to the design should also be acknowledged. Since the study is based on post-seminar evaluation material, the findings reflect participants' self-reported perceptions and immediate reflections rather than

independently verified long-term impact. For this reason, the article does not claim to measure sustained behavioural change or broader social outcomes, but rather the perceived educational contribution of the seminar at the end of the learning process. This is fully consistent with exploratory evaluation studies, which are commonly used to understand programme quality, relevance, and perceived effects in applied educational contexts (Hopson, 2009).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Overall Satisfaction and Perceived Relevance

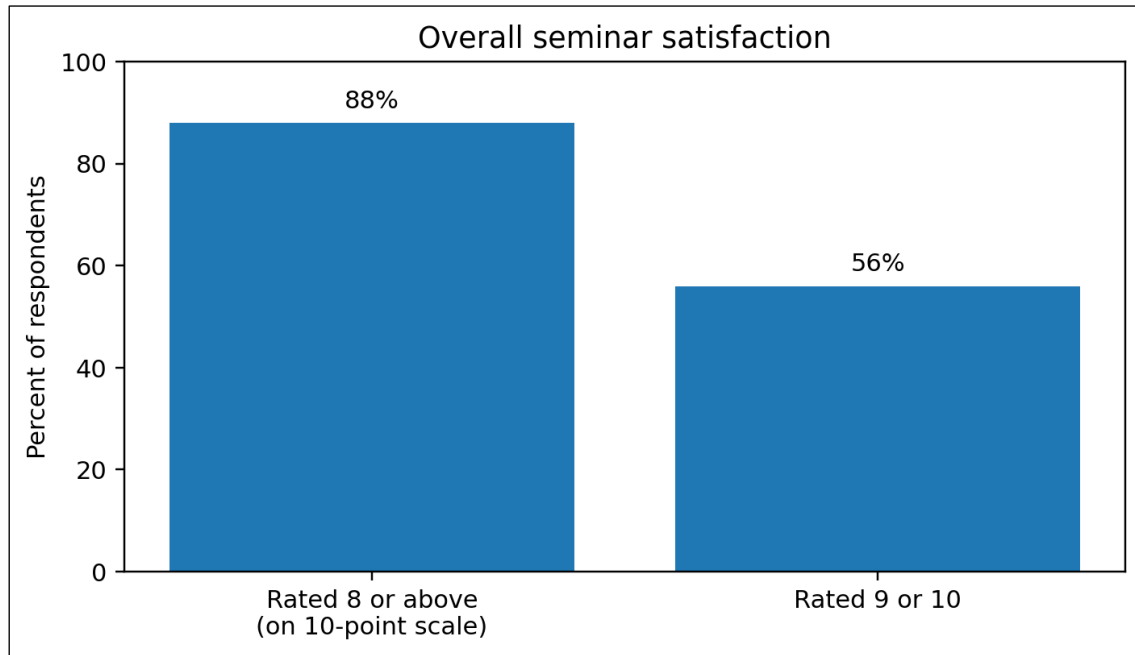
The evaluation findings indicate that the seminar was perceived as highly successful by participants. According to the post-seminar evaluation report, 88% of respondents rated their overall satisfaction at 8 or above on a 10-point scale, while 56% rated the seminar at the highest levels of the scale (9 or 10). These findings point to a strongly positive reception of the learning experience and suggest that participants experienced the seminar as a supportive and credible educational environment for addressing a sensitive and potentially polarising topic. In non-formal education, such conditions are not peripheral; they are foundational, because meaningful participation in dialogue-oriented learning depends on trust, relational safety, and the perceived legitimacy of the learning space (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021).

Participants repeatedly referred to the atmosphere, facilitation quality, and diversity of the group as central strengths of the seminar. This is analytically important because overall satisfaction in this case appears to reflect more than positive reactions to logistics or hospitality. Rather, it appears closely connected to participants' perception that the seminar was educationally relevant, participatory, and professionally useful. Research on non-formal and diversity-oriented learning has shown that participants are more likely to value educational activities when they perceive both personal significance and practical relevance in the learning process (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

**Table 1:** Key quantitative findings reported in the seminar evaluation

| Indicator              | Reported value  | Interpretive note   |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Overall satisfaction   | 88% rated the seminar at 8 or above                     | Indicates broad positive reception of the overall learning experience |
| Top-end satisfaction   | 56% rated the seminar at 9 or 10                        | Shows a substantial proportion of very highly satisfied participants  |
| Learning outcomes      | More than 90% satisfied or very satisfied               | Suggests strong perceived educational benefit                         |
| Training methodologies | More than 95% satisfied or highly satisfied             | Indicates very strong appreciation of the non-formal methods used     |
| Follow-up confidence   | More than 85% felt confident applying practices locally | Suggests perceived transferability and practical readiness            |

**Note:** Percentages are reported as they appear in the original evaluation material. For some indicators, the report gives threshold formulations (e.g., more than 90%) rather than exact values.



**Figure 1:** Overall satisfaction with the seminar

As shown in Figure 1, the overall satisfaction pattern is not simply positive but strongly concentrated toward the upper end of the scale. This strengthens the interpretation that the seminar was experienced as an effective and credible educational intervention rather than as a merely acceptable training event.

#### **4.2 Learning Outcomes: Understanding, Skills, and Reflexivity**

The evaluation report indicates that more than 90% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the seminar's learning outcomes. Three particularly strong outcome areas emerge from the material. First, participants reported improved skills in interpersonal dialogue. They referred to greater readiness to listen, engage, and communicate across difference. In the context of interfaith dialogue, these capacities are not secondary soft skills but core educational outcomes, since dialogue depends on relational competence, openness, and the ability to remain engaged in the presence of difference (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser, Liefbroer, *et al.*, 2023).

Second, participants emphasised that they left the seminar with a richer toolbox of both practical and theoretical resources. From a youth-work perspective, this is especially significant. Training activities are often judged not only by whether they raise awareness, but also by whether they support future facilitation, project design, and adaptation in real professional settings. The seminar appears to have combined conceptual input with transferable methods in a way that participants found useful and applicable. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence from educational intervention studies showing that perceived practical applicability is closely linked to participants' perceived value of training and their willingness to use what they have learned in subsequent settings (Karachalios & Manesis, 2025; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021).

Third, the seminar generated substantial opportunities for self-reflection. Participant comments suggest that the learning process encouraged reflection on identity, belief, privilege, and personal assumptions. This is one of the most important findings of the study. Interfaith dialogue in educational settings cannot be reduced to learning about others; it also requires reflexive engagement with oneself. This inward dimension is fully consistent with transformative learning perspectives, which emphasise the role of reflection, dissonance, and relational encounter in processes of perspective transformation and ethical learning (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021).

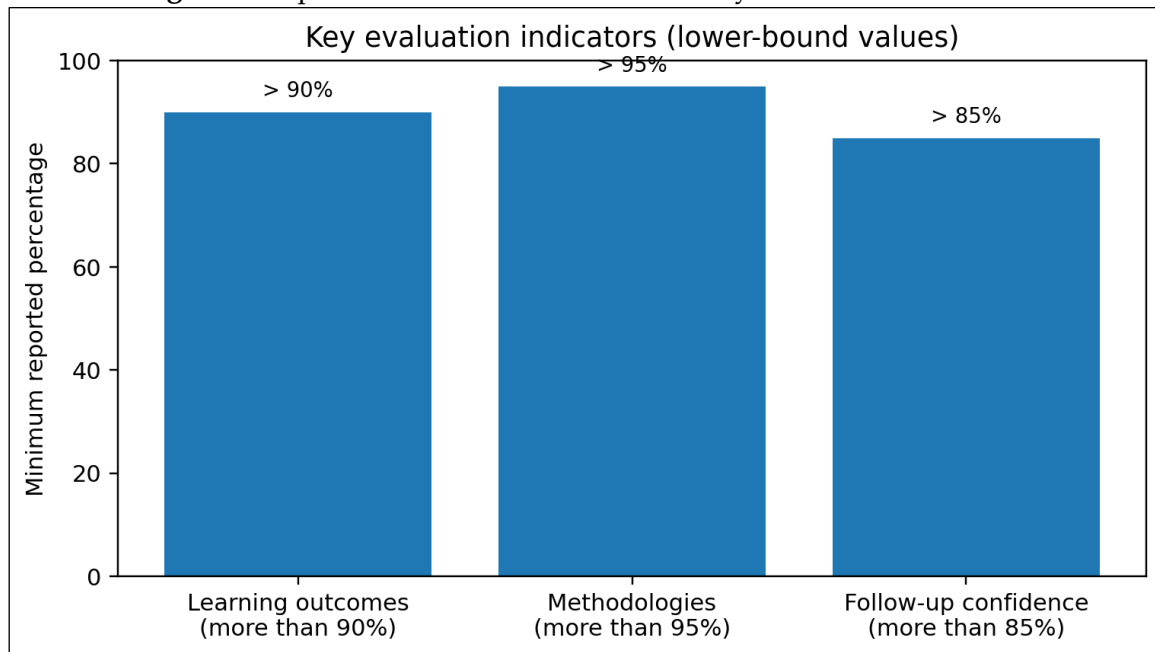
### **4.3 The Contribution of Non-Formal Education Methodologies**

Participant satisfaction with the methodologies used in the seminar was exceptionally high, with more than 95% expressing satisfaction or high satisfaction. This finding suggests that the methodological architecture of the seminar was central to its perceived success. The programme did not rely on a single mode of delivery. Instead, it combined dialogical, experiential, reflective, and collaborative tasks that allowed participants to engage cognitively, emotionally, and socially with the theme of interfaith dialogue. This plurality is one of the defining strengths of non-formal education, especially when the topic under discussion involves identity, worldviews, prejudice, and coexistence (Essomba *et al.*, 2023).

The methods described in the evaluation report appear to have functioned in complementary ways. Ice-breakers and trust-building activities helped establish relational safety. Group work and dialogical exercises enabled peer learning and the exchange of perspectives. Activities focused on identity and privilege created space for critical reflection. Encounters with faith representatives supported direct engagement with lived religious diversity. Reflection sessions helped participants process and integrate what they had experienced. Taken together, these design elements reflect the kind of holistic pedagogical structure often required when educational work addresses emotionally, ethically, and socially complex themes.

The findings align with broader evidence suggesting that participatory, experiential, and well-facilitated methods can promote engagement, perceived competence, and deeper understanding across diverse educational settings (Karachalios, 2024; Karachalios *et al.*, 2026; Tasakou & Karachalios, 2025; Γομάτος *et al.*, 2025). Although the thematic field differs, the pedagogical principle is similar: when learners are invited to act, reflect, and co-construct meaning, the educational process becomes more memorable and more transferable to future practice.

**Figure 2:** Reported lower-bound values for key evaluation indicators



**Note:** The original evaluation report states that more than 90% of respondents were satisfied with the learning outcomes, more than 95% were satisfied with the methodologies, and more than 85% felt confident applying interfaith dialogue practices in their own settings. The figure visualises these lower-bound values to avoid overstating precision.

#### 4.4 Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Although the evaluation was strongly positive overall, it also identified several limitations that are pedagogically significant. Participants expressed the need for more time for reflection and deeper engagement with the topics discussed. This is not a minor logistical concern. If interfaith dialogue is treated seriously as an educational process, then time for processing, questioning, and trust-building becomes part of learning quality itself. Compressing these dimensions too tightly may reduce the depth of transformative potential even when immediate satisfaction remains high. In this sense, the evaluation points to a familiar tension in short-term non-formal training: high engagement does not automatically guarantee sufficient time for consolidation and deeper reflection (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023).

Participants also suggested greater exposure to local initiatives and religious spaces in the host context. This indicates a desire for more situated and practice-connected learning. Non-formal education is often especially powerful when reflection is linked to concrete settings, actors, and lived realities. This suggestion, therefore, points toward a productive direction for future seminar design: integrating more community-based and place-based elements that allow participants to observe how interfaith dialogue is enacted in real organisational and social environments. Research on educational transfer and contextualised learning supports the argument that such connections strengthen both relevance and memorability (Karachalios & Manesis, 2025; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

A smaller number of comments concerned logistics and inclusivity, particularly food arrangements and religious requirements. This, too, should be taken seriously. In a seminar explicitly focused on interfaith dialogue, organisational arrangements are not neutral. They communicate whether diversity is genuinely anticipated and respected. Inclusive logistics therefore form part of the educational credibility of the programme rather than a background administrative matter (Essomba *et al.*, 2023).

**Table 2:** Main qualitative themes emerging from the evaluation

| Theme                                 | Interpretation  | Illustrative example from the evaluation  |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Atmosphere and diversity of the group | Participants valued the safe, respectful, and diverse learning environment                | <i>"I met people of different backgrounds and was inspired by their work."</i>                                    |
| Practical and theoretical tools       | The seminar was appreciated for offering usable facilitation methods and conceptual input | <i>"I learned new techniques, new methods of facilitation, and how to apply interfaith dialogue practically."</i> |
| Self-reflection                       | The experience supported deeper reflection on identity, perspective, and dialogue         | <i>"I discovered new things about myself and how important it is to open my mind to other perspectives."</i>      |
| Need for deeper processing            | Participants wanted more time for reflection and for engaging with local initiatives      | <i>"I wish we had more time to delve deeper into the topics and share our best practices."</i>                    |

#### 4.5 Transferability, Confidence, and Follow-Up Intentions

One of the most encouraging findings of the evaluation concerns follow-up confidence and intended transfer. More than 85% of respondents reported that they felt confident implementing interfaith dialogue practices in their own environments, although some were less certain about organising international activities. Participants described a range of follow-up intentions, including sharing knowledge with colleagues, developing new Erasmus+ projects, and initiating community-based events or workshops. These findings suggest that the seminar did more than generate positive immediate impressions; it appears to have supported a sense of agency and practical orientation among participants.

This dimension is especially important in youth work, where the value of professional learning is closely tied to whether it can be adapted and used in subsequent practice. Comparable findings have been reported in other educational programme evaluations where participants describe not only increased awareness but also greater readiness for action after structured, practice-oriented learning interventions (Karachalios & Manesis, 2025; Karachalios & Tantaroudas, 2025). In the present case, intended transfer took both interpersonal and organisational forms, ranging from sharing insights with colleagues to designing future local or international initiatives.

At the same time, the difference between confidence in local implementation and lower confidence in organising international activities suggests that educational transfer is not uniform. Some competencies may be more readily activated than others, particularly those that are closer to participants' existing roles and contexts. This finding

reinforces the value of follow-up support, networking structures, and staged models of capacity-building that connect introductory seminars with later mentoring, partnership-building, or project-development opportunities (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

## 5. Implications for Youth Work and Non-Formal Education

The findings of this study carry several important implications for youth work and the broader field of non-formal education.

First, they reinforce the argument that interfaith dialogue training for youth professionals should be designed as an explicitly experiential, dialogical, and reflective process rather than as a predominantly lecture-based transfer of information. Participants in the seminar appeared to value most strongly those methods that enabled them to speak, listen, question, reflect, and engage with difference in concrete and relational ways. This is fully consistent with the literature suggesting that interfaith learning is shaped not only by exposure to knowledge about religion and worldview diversity, but also by structured encounter, relational engagement, and guided reflection (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser *et al.*, 2024). In this respect, non-formal education offers a particularly suitable pedagogical framework because its methodologies can support both interpersonal dialogue and the development of reflective and action-oriented competences (Essomba *et al.*, 2023).

Second, the findings suggest that effective interfaith dialogue education should intentionally combine personal, interpersonal, and professional dimensions of learning. Participants did not simply report gains in conceptual understanding; they also described processes of self-reflection, greater awareness of identity and privilege, and a clearer sense of how the seminar's learning could be transferred into their professional practice. This multidimensional character of learning is important, because the literature on interfaith initiatives increasingly shows that valuable outcomes extend beyond knowledge acquisition to include communication skills, appreciation of other worldviews, and deeper forms of relational understanding (Visser *et al.*, 2024). For youth work specifically, this implies that training design should not separate identity work from facilitation practice. On the contrary, educational activities should deliberately connect personal reflexivity, diversity literacy, and professional application.

Third, the study highlights the importance of methodological coherence and inclusive facilitation. In programmes dealing with diversity, faith, and dialogue, the educational message is communicated not only through formal content but also through the organisation of space, interaction, and everyday logistics. Participants' comments regarding food, religious needs, and inclusivity underline that logistical arrangements are pedagogically meaningful, especially in seminars whose declared purpose is respect across difference. This aligns with recent scholarship arguing that educational engagement with religious diversity must be institutionally and pedagogically coherent if it is to be experienced as credible by participants (Aneas *et al.*, 2024; Essomba *et al.*, 2023). In practical terms, this means that methodology, facilitation style, and

organisational arrangements should reinforce one another rather than operate as separate layers of the programme.

Fourth, the results suggest that the value of such training should not be confined to the seminar itself. Participants expressed confidence in applying what they had learned in their own local or professional environments, but they were somewhat less certain about translating that learning into broader international or project-based action. This difference is important because it indicates that educational transfer is not automatic and may require additional support, structure, and follow-up.

Dialogue can therefore be understood not merely as a teaching method, but as a broader educational orientation for engaging with controversial and sensitive issues in pluralistic societies. In adult and non-formal education, dialogical learning is closely linked to listening, participation, respect for learners' experience, and the co-construction of meaning (Vella, 2002). In the context of interfaith and intercultural encounters, dialogue requires openness, reflexivity, empathy, and the willingness to acknowledge differing perspectives without reducing disagreement to prejudice or forcing immediate consensus. Particularly when addressing topics related to religion, identity, and values, dialogical approaches can create spaces in which disagreement is negotiated respectfully (Halsall & Roebben, 2006; Larkins & Owen, 2025; Visser *et al.*, 2024). In this regard, non-formal education can offer a holistic pedagogical approach to interfaith dialogue by combining cognitive, emotional, social, and experiential dimensions of learning. By fostering participatory and relationship-oriented learning environments, it can support the development of communicative and reflective competences needed to address sensitive societal issues in inclusive and constructive ways.

The literature on interfaith initiatives similarly notes that positive learning outcomes are often reported at the level of awareness, communication, and appreciation, whereas more complex outcomes related to leadership, action, and structural change are harder to achieve and sustain (Visser *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, if non-formal education is to contribute meaningfully to interfaith dialogue beyond the immediate seminar experience, greater attention should be paid to follow-up mechanisms that help participants consolidate and apply their learning over time.

Finally, the findings have wider implications for the role of youth work in plural democratic societies. Youth professionals increasingly operate in contexts marked by cultural, religious, and worldview diversity, as well as by polarisation, misinformation, and exclusionary discourses. Training in interfaith dialogue can therefore be understood not as a niche topic, but as part of a broader educational agenda concerning inclusive citizenship, coexistence, democratic participation, and peacebuilding. Recent literature in religious education and interreligious competence supports the view that dialogue is not an optional supplement in diverse societies, but an educational practice that must be intentionally cultivated through structured pedagogical processes (Aneas *et al.*, 2024; Larkins & Owen, 2025). From this perspective, the present study supports the idea that non-formal education can serve as a meaningful site for preparing youth professionals to respond constructively to diversity in both interpersonal and community settings.

## 6. Recommendations for Future Practice and Programme Design

Based on the findings of the present study and the wider literature, several recommendations can be proposed for the future design of interfaith dialogue programmes in youth work and non-formal education.

First, future seminars should be intentionally designed around experiential, dialogical, and reflective learning principles. Activities that promote encounter, peer exchange, storytelling, collaborative reflection, and embodied participation appear especially valuable in helping participants move beyond abstract tolerance discourse toward deeper forms of understanding and engagement. This recommendation is supported by both the present findings and broader interfaith learning scholarship, which suggests that meaningful outcomes are more likely when dialogue is experienced rather than merely discussed (Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Second, future programme design should allocate more time for reflection, processing, and the gradual development of trust. The evaluation data showed that participants appreciated the seminar strongly but also wanted more time to engage deeply with the issues discussed. This point is pedagogically important. Interfaith dialogue involves emotionally and ethically demanding forms of learning, and such processes rarely unfold effectively under conditions of excessive time pressure. Future programmes should therefore build in slower reflective moments, extended debriefing, and opportunities for participants to revisit insights across the seminar journey rather than treating reflection as a marginal or final-stage activity.

Third, future initiatives should integrate more community-based and context-sensitive learning elements. Participants' interest in visiting local initiatives and encountering lived examples of interfaith practice indicates that learning may be deepened when conceptual and interpersonal work is connected to actual organisations, communities, and religious spaces. This is consistent with current research emphasising that educational engagement with religious diversity benefits from being situated in concrete contexts rather than remaining solely classroom- or workshop-based (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Quirós Domínguez *et al.*, 2023). Organisers could therefore consider incorporating site visits, practitioner dialogues, community partnerships, or case-based local learning components into future seminar designs.

Fourth, future programmes should integrate inclusive logistical planning more systematically into their educational design. Diversity-sensitive training should ensure that practical arrangements, including food, prayer-related considerations, schedule flexibility, and communication about participants' needs, are addressed proactively rather than reactively. In programmes on interfaith dialogue, inclusion is not only an organisational matter but also part of the educational substance of the programme itself. A seminar that aims to promote respect across difference should therefore embody that respect in its material, logistical, and relational design.

Fifth, stronger post-seminar support structures should be established. Since many participants appear willing to transfer learning into their own settings, future

programmes would benefit from formal follow-up opportunities such as peer exchange groups, communities of practice, online mentoring sessions, project incubation workshops, or alumni networking spaces. This is especially important for helping participants move from confidence at the local level toward greater competence in collaborative and international initiative development. Given that the literature suggests more advanced outcomes are harder to sustain than initial attitudinal gains, follow-up support may be essential for turning short-term inspiration into longer-term practice (Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Sixth, future research and evaluation should move beyond immediate post-seminar feedback and incorporate longer-term assessment designs. While post-programme evaluation is useful for understanding participant satisfaction and perceived learning, it offers only limited evidence regarding sustained behavioural change, professional application, or community impact. Future studies could therefore incorporate delayed follow-up surveys, interviews, reflective journals, or case studies of local implementation to better understand how interfaith dialogue training is translated into practice over time. Such an approach would also respond to the methodological gaps identified in the literature, especially the need for more robust and context-sensitive evaluation frameworks for interfaith initiatives (Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that future interfaith dialogue programmes in youth work should not simply provide information about diversity, but should create coherent learning ecologies in which pedagogy, facilitation, logistics, reflection, and follow-up all work together to support meaningful and transferable learning. In this sense, the value of non-formal education lies not only in its flexibility, but also in its capacity to connect encounter, reflexivity, and action within educational processes that are both pedagogically meaningful and socially consequential.

## 7. Conclusion

This article examined the educational contribution of the 3-day "Power of Interfaith Dialogue" seminar as a case of non-formal education addressed to youth professionals. Drawing on post-seminar evaluation data, the findings suggest that participants perceived the seminar as highly relevant, educationally meaningful, and professionally useful. The reported findings indicate high overall satisfaction, strong appreciation of the learning outcomes, very positive assessments of the methodologies used, and considerable confidence regarding the future implementation of interfaith dialogue practices in participants' own contexts. At the same time, the evaluation also identified important limitations, particularly the need for more time for reflection, deeper engagement with complex issues, and stronger connection with local interfaith initiatives.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of the article: non-formal education can function as a meaningful pathway to interfaith dialogue when it is intentionally designed around participation, encounter, reflexivity, and practical

transfer. The seminar did not appear to operate merely as an informative event about religion or diversity. Rather, it created a structured learning environment in which participants could engage with difference through dialogue, self-reflection, experiential activities, and collaborative exchange. In this sense, the study reinforces wider scholarship suggesting that interfaith learning is best understood not only as a matter of knowledge acquisition but also as a developmental and relational educational process shaped by interaction, trust, and guided reflection (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Mayhew & Rockenbach, 2021; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

A particularly important contribution of the study lies in showing that the educational value of interfaith dialogue training for youth professionals extends across multiple dimensions. Participants reported gains not only in understanding the concept of interfaith dialogue, but also in interpersonal communication, methodological preparedness, and self-reflection regarding identity, privilege, and worldview. This multidimensional character is significant because it suggests that effective interfaith education in youth work should not separate the personal from the professional, nor the cognitive from the relational. Instead, meaningful learning appears to emerge when educational design integrates conceptual clarity, emotional safety, participatory engagement, and opportunities for application in real practice.

At the same time, the study should be interpreted considering its methodological limitations. The analysis is based on anonymised programme evaluation material and therefore reflects participants' self-reported perceptions at the end of the seminar rather than independently verified long-term impact. As a result, the article does not claim to demonstrate sustained behavioural change or broader community effects. Its contribution is more specific: it provides empirical insight into how a concrete non-formal learning activity on interfaith dialogue was experienced by participants and what kinds of outcomes they considered most valuable. This kind of evidence remains important, especially in a field where empirical studies of non-formal interfaith education for youth professionals are still relatively limited (Essomba *et al.*, 2023; Visser *et al.*, 2024).

Overall, the article contributes to the growing discussion on the role of non-formal education in fostering interfaith dialogue, inclusive youth work, and peace-oriented educational practice in plural societies. More specifically, it offers an evaluation-based and practice-grounded account of how one international seminar was experienced by youth professionals in a field that remains comparatively underexplored. The findings suggest that interfaith dialogue training is more likely to be meaningful when it is experiential rather than transmissive, reflexive rather than merely informative, and action-oriented rather than limited to short-term awareness-raising. Future research should build on these findings through follow-up studies, longitudinal designs, and comparative analyses of similar programmes in different contexts. Such work would help clarify not only how participants experience interfaith learning in the short term, but also how such experiences shape their professional practices, collaborative initiatives, and community engagement over time.

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### **Ethics Statement**

The study is based on anonymised and aggregated programme evaluation material. No personal identifiers were included in the dataset used for analysis, and all participant comments are reported anonymously.

### **Data Availability**

The evaluation material analysed in this study is not publicly available in full to protect participant anonymity. Aggregated findings and selected anonymised extracts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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