



THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN SHAPING TOLERANCE ATTITUDES AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The role of multicultural education in shaping tolerance attitudes among elementary school students is crucial amid Indonesia's rich cultural diversity. Multicultural education is understood not only as a form of appreciation for diversity but also as an active effort to foster mutual respect, empathy, and a spirit of unity within the school environment, particularly among students. Through a literature review approach, this study examines theories and empirical findings related to the integration of multicultural values in elementary school learning. The results show that elementary schools hold a strategic position in instilling tolerance values through the integration of an inclusive curriculum, active learning strategies, the habituation of a just school culture, and teacher role modeling. However, several challenges exist in its implementation, such as the dominance of majority culture, the lack of teacher training, and the limited evaluation of students' character. The findings recommend strengthening multicultural education policies, developing teacher capacity, and involving the school community as long-term solutions for building a tolerant generation that upholds national unity. With a consistent and comprehensive approach, multicultural education can serve as a cornerstone in preserving social integration and strengthening Indonesia's pluralism*

Keywords: *multicultural education, tolerance, elementary school, diversity, unity*

Abstrak: Peran pendidikan multikultural dalam membentuk sikap toleransi pada siswa sekolah dasar sangat krusial di tengah keberagaman budaya Indonesia. Pendidikan multikultural dipahami bukan hanya sebagai bentuk penghargaan terhadap keberagaman, tetapi juga sebagai upaya aktif dalam menumbuhkan sikap saling menghormati, empati, dan semangat persatuan dilingkungan sekolah khususnya di kalangan peserta didik. Melalui pendekatan studi pustaka, penelitian ini menelaah teori dan temuan empiris terkait integrasi nilai-nilai multikultural dalam pembelajaran disekolah dasar. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa sekolah dasar memiliki posisi strategis dalam menanamkan nilai-nilai toleransi melalui integrasi kurikulum inklusif, strategi pembelajaran aktif, pembiasaan budaya sekolah yang adil, serta keteladanan guru. Namun terdapat beberapa tantangan dalam penerapannya seperti dominasi budaya mayoritas, kurangnya pelatihan guru, dan minimnya evaluasi karakter siswa. Dalam temuan ini merekomendasikan penguatan kebijakan pendidikan multikultural, pengembangan kapasitas guru, serta pelibatan komunitas sekolah sebagai solusi jangka panjang dalam membangun generasi yang toleran dan menjunjung tinggi persatuan bangsa. Dengan pendekatan yang konsisten dan komprehensif, pendidikan multikultural dapat menjadi pilar utama dalam menjaga integrasi sosial dan memperkuat kebhinekaan Indonesia.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan multikultural, toleransi, sekolah dasar, keberagaman, persatuan

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the term multiculturalism comes from the word *multi*, meaning plural; *cultural*, meaning culture; and *ism*, which refers to an ideology or belief. Simply put, multiculturalism is an ideology that respects cultural diversity within society (Nugroho 2016). According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012), “multiculturalism is a perspective in which social institutions must reflect multiple cultures.” Social institutions include various forms of organizations that play important roles in societal life, such as formal educational institutions like schools, community-rooted organizations that function to meet social needs, and official institutions established by the state that hold authority in governance, law, and public services, as well as other types of institutions that contribute to shaping the social order (Nurhayati and Agustina 2020; Saraswati and Manalu 2023).

Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and Bhikhu Parekh view multiculturalism not only as a cultural concept but also as a political discourse that emphasizes the importance of recognition and respect for different cultural groups (Banks, 2006; Viktorahadi, 2020). From this perspective, multiculturalism demands the recognition of the right to be different as well as the strengthening of collective rights for minority groups to maintain their cultural identity amidst the dominance of majority cultures. With more than 17,000 islands stretching from Sabang to Merauke and a population exceeding 284 million people, Indonesia represents a vivid portrait of extraordinary diversity. This diversity is reflected not only in ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group (SARA) differences, but also in languages, customs, and cultural values embedded in society. In such a complex social landscape, the spirit of unity becomes a crucial foundation for maintaining national integrity. It is in this context that the concept of multiculturalism plays an important role as a foundation for nurturing togetherness in diversity, and as a strategy to strengthen national identity without erasing the uniqueness of each community group (Dharma and Siregar 2014; Hafiz 2021; Nanggala 2020; Nurul Fadhillah 2024; Winataputra 2012; Zainuddin and Ersi 2023)

In Indonesia, the spirit of multiculturalism has long existed and is reflected in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means “Unity in Diversity.” This principle is not merely a slogan, but is manifested in various aspects of community life from kinship systems, cultural values, to shared living principles that respect differences. However, in the era of globalization and rapid information exchange, the values of multiculturalism face new challenges. Social polarization, identity conflict, and identity politics have emerged as serious threats to national unity (Istianah 2024; Istianah, Irawan, and Mas’ud 2024; Mazid and Istianah 2023)

In the current context, the challenge of maintaining unity amid diversity has become increasingly complex with the presence of social media as a new space for interaction. Social media plays a dual role in Indonesia’s multicultural society. On one hand, it can be used to spread messages of tolerance and diversity. On the other hand, it often becomes a medium for spreading hate speech, negative stereotypes, and hoaxes that exploit differences to incite conflict. The lack of digital literacy makes society easily provoked by unverified information. Therefore, a deep understanding and the development of positive attitudes are needed such as openness in thinking, the ability to see differences as enriching potentials, and a commitment to uphold universal human values. In the Indonesian context, social media often serves as the main stage in shaping public opinion on issues of diversity. Events such as ethnic identity controversies during elections, interreligious debates in online spaces, and the spread of SARA-based hoaxes demonstrate that the digital sphere has a significant influence on the social dynamics of a multicultural society. For example, during elections or certain religious events, social media is frequently filled with hate speech, negative stereotypes, and exclusive narratives that have the potential to divide the

community. This phenomenon illustrates how social media can be a tool for reinforcing the dominance of certain cultures while reducing space for minority groups to express their identities equally (Anggraeni et al. 2025; Biggs et al. 2008; Edwards et al. 2020; Irawan and Firdaus 2021; Suhardiyanto, Wijayanti, and Irawan 2025).

Elementary school is the initial stage in character development for children. At this stage, students begin to build their understanding of the world around them, including the differences and diversity present in society (Bahri 2019). Multicultural education emerges as a relevant approach to instill the values of pluralism, appreciation of differences, and the formation of inclusive attitudes among students. Through multicultural education, students are expected to grow into individuals who are tolerant, respectful of others, and conscious of the importance of unity in national life.

METHOD

This study uses a literature review method, as explained by Abdussamad (2020); Moleong (2018); Sugiyono (2014) who states that a literature review is a theoretical analysis of various references relevant to the values, cultures, and norms that emerge within a specific social context. In this study, the literature review is conducted by examining relevant sources related to multicultural education, attitudes of tolerance, and the values of unity within elementary school environments. The researcher collected and analyzed various sources such as books, scholarly journals, research articles, policy reports, and educational documents discussing the concept of multicultural education and its implementation at the elementary school level. The main focus of this review lies in understanding theoretical frameworks and prior research findings that demonstrate how multicultural education can contribute to fostering tolerant attitudes and strengthening unity among young students. Through this review, the researcher also aims to identify research gaps or areas that remain underexplored and are worth investigating further (Abdussamad 2020; Creswell 2017; Harahap 2020; Moleong 2018). The stages of the literature review research conducted are as follows:

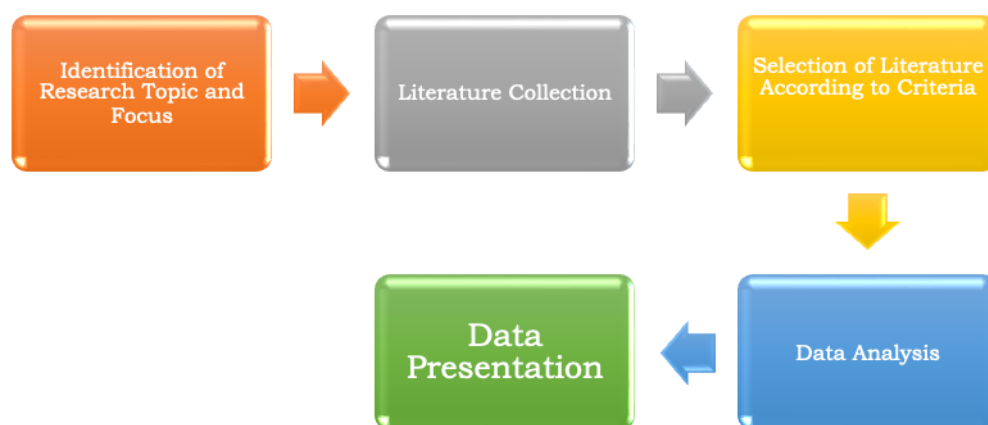


Figure 1. Data Collection Methods
Source: Adapted from Sugiyono (2020)

The data collected from various literature sources were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, organizing the information based on key themes such as the value of tolerance, appreciation of diversity, and the integration of unity values into the elementary school curriculum. The analysis process involved stages of data reduction, presentation of data in the form of descriptive narratives, and drawing conclusions from the identified themes. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the strengthening of multicultural education models within the framework of character education and support the development of a young generation that is tolerant and upholds national unity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is an approach in the field of education that emphasizes the importance of appreciating students' cultural, religious, linguistic, and social background diversity in society (Bahri 2019; Saraswati and Manalu 2023). This approach not only acknowledges the existence of differences but also views them as strengths that enrich the learning process and the students' social lives. According to James A. Banks (2006), the goal of multicultural education is to help students develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to live and participate ethically and effectively in a pluralistic society. This aligns with the values of democracy, social justice, and human rights, which serve as an essential foundation for creating a peaceful and inclusive society (Sahrudin et al. 2023; Saputra 2024; Utama 2021).

In the context of Indonesian education, multicultural education becomes highly relevant considering the country's rich cultural diversity. The implementation of multicultural education is important not only to maintain social harmony but also to strengthen the sense of national identity rooted in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("*Unity in Diversity*"). Schools, as formal educational institutions, have a strategic role in facilitating this understanding. Through a multicultural approach, students are taught that differences are not threats, but social realities that must be accepted, appreciated, and preserved in the spirit of unity (Pradanna and Abdulkarim 2023; Pradanna and Irawan 2024; Rahman et al. 2020).

Elementary schools, in particular, represent a crucial stage of education as they mark the early phase of children's character development. At this age, students are in a golden period of social and moral growth. Therefore, values such as tolerance, justice, and respect for differences must be instilled from an early age. Multicultural education can be integrated through curricula that touch upon various aspects of local and national cultures, socially-experiential learning methods, and the selection of inclusive and culturally representative learning materials. Additionally, schools must foster a social climate that enables cross-cultural interactions in a safe and respectful environment (Angga et al. 2022; Irawan, Masyitoh, Rahmat, et al. 2024; Irawan, Wijayanti, et al. 2025; Irawan, Masyitoh, and Sundawa 2023; Prihatini and Sugiarti 2022; Primayana and Dewi 2021; Sholekah 2020).

Furthermore, the implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools also demands active participation from all school stakeholders, especially teachers as the main facilitators of the learning process. Teachers are not merely deliverers of content; they must also serve as role models in being fair and respectful of diversity. When teachers demonstrate appreciation for differences and provide space for all students to voice their perspectives, students in turn will develop inclusive and open attitudes toward their peers from different backgrounds. In the long term, multicultural education will shape students into empathetic individuals, capable of working across identity lines, and ready to be responsible citizens in a pluralistic society. Through

a holistic, consistent, and participatory approach, multicultural education in elementary schools can serve as a strategic tool to strengthen social cohesion and build a future generation that is tolerant and upholds the value of unity.

Amid the challenges of globalization and the increasing trend of intolerance, multicultural education has become a critical necessity, not just an option. Schools that successfully implement multicultural values will produce children who are not only intellectually capable but also socially and emotionally mature those who are able to become guardians of diversity and drivers of national unity in Indonesia's future (Ahmad 2015; Nur Latifah, Marini, and Maksum 2021; Utaminingsih et al. 2023).

The Urgency of Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

Multicultural education is highly important in Indonesia's education system because the nation has a high level of diversity ethnically, religiously, racially, and culturally. Elementary schools, as the earliest stage of formal education, play a strategic role in shaping children's views and social attitudes toward this diversity. Children at the elementary school age are in a stage of concrete cognitive development and are beginning to form their social identities. Therefore, values such as tolerance, mutual respect, and cooperation must be instilled from an early age (Minnett, Vandell, and Santrock 1983; Nurman, Yusriadi, and Hamim 2022; Pramono and Suseno 2021). At this stage, multicultural education becomes a critical foundation for building an inclusive and peaceful society.

The urgency of multicultural education continues to grow as social realities show ongoing tendencies toward intolerance, discrimination, and stereotyping even among children. Children who are not introduced to the values of diversity from an early age risk growing up with exclusive attitudes and are more likely to be influenced by social prejudices. According to Banks (2006), multicultural education is not only aimed at introducing different cultures, but also at equipping students with social skills, empathy, and critical thinking abilities related to issues of justice and inequality in society. This demonstrates that multicultural education has a transformational dimension that cannot be overlooked.

Moreover, elementary school is the first place where children interact with peers from different backgrounds. These interactions can be a source of conflict if not guided through learning that emphasizes the values of diversity. Multicultural education enables teachers and schools to frame differences as shared strengths rather than obstacles. Banks (2006) emphasizes that multicultural education must be capable of creating a learning environment that values the identity of every student and supports their academic and social development equally. Therefore, the implementation of multicultural education must be designed with an approach that is not merely informative but also formative in shaping attitudes.

The importance of multicultural education also lies in its ability to strengthen national identity and unity amid diversity. In elementary school, children need to be introduced to national symbols, the cultures of other regions, and the values of Pancasila as the nation's foundational philosophy. This aligns with the vision of the "Pancasila Student Profile" in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of global diversity as a core character trait of Indonesian learners. Multicultural education becomes a means to foster love for the country not in a narrow sense, but in an open-minded way that embraces differences and respects others' rights in the context of national life (Irawan, Masyitoh, et al. 2025; Irawan, Masyitoh, R. Rahmat, et al. 2024; Irawan and Masyitoh 2023).

Thus, multicultural education should not be viewed as an additional or supplementary component in the elementary school curriculum. Instead, it must become an integral part of an education system focused on national character building. Children who are equipped with multicultural awareness from an early age will be more prepared to face the challenges of living in a pluralistic and complex society. This form of education is not only socially and culturally relevant but also represents a long-term investment in building a tolerant, democratic, and peace-oriented generation (Abror 2020; Dwintari and Murdiono 2023; Suharyanto 2013). Therefore, elementary schools must design curricula, learning activities, and school cultures that consistently and tangibly reflect multicultural values.

Strategies for Implementing Multicultural Education

The implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools cannot be separated from structured and systemic strategies. These strategies encompass various aspects from curriculum development and learning processes to school community involvement. According to Banks (2006), the implementation of multicultural education must include four key dimensions: content integration, equitable learning processes, prejudice reduction, and the creation of a just and democratic school culture. These four dimensions serve as the foundation for designing relevant strategies at the elementary level.

Table 1. Multicultural Education Strategy

Strategy	Example of Implementation
Curriculum Integration	Linking subject matter to local cultures
Active Learning Methods	Group discussions about diversity, cultural drama, collaborative school project
School Culture Development	Fostering greetings, politeness, and celebrations of national and religious holidays
Teacher Role Modeling	Teachers act fairly, avoid discrimination, and provide equal voice to all students.
Parental and Community Involvement	Organizing cultural festivals with parents, inviting community leaders

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025

Based on Figure 2 above, One main strategy is the integration of multicultural values into the curriculum. This can be achieved by developing inclusive teaching materials, incorporating local cultural content, and representing the cultures from across Indonesia. Sleeter and Grant (2007) emphasized that a multicultural curriculum must provide space for all cultural groups so that students feel their identities are respected. For example, in Bahasa Indonesia classes, teachers can incorporate folktales from various regions as instructional material that fosters cross-cultural understanding.

The second strategy is the use of active and participatory learning methods. Teachers can adopt approaches such as group discussions on cultural differences, social case studies, role-playing, and collaborative projects between students from different backgrounds. According to Nieto (2010), learning approaches that involve dialogue, empathy, and cross-cultural cooperation are more effective in fostering awareness and tolerance than conventional methods. Teachers must serve as fair dialogue facilitators and encourage openness among students.

The third strategy involves developing a school culture that reflects values of diversity and inclusivity. Schools can organize activities such as Culture Day, interregional art exhibitions, and traditional competitions from different areas. A school environment that displays multicultural symbols such as regional flags, local poetry, or traditional decorations can also strengthen an inclusive atmosphere. A school culture that values diversity will enhance students' sense of acceptance and belonging in their school environment.

Another strategy involves teacher and school staff role modeling. Teachers are not only educators but also behavioral models for students. When teachers demonstrate fairness, openness to differences, and skillful conflict resolution in cultural matters, students will learn indirectly from these examples. On the other hand, involving parents and the community is also vital in reinforcing multicultural values. Schools can engage local communities in cultural festivals, invite traditional leaders, or hold interfaith dialogues. This partnership ensures that multicultural education does not stop in the classroom but becomes a lived practice within the community.

The visual diagram referenced above illustrates the relationship between the main strategies and their practical implementations. Each strategy leads to a set of activities that can be carried out in elementary schools. Through synergistic application, multicultural education will become a powerful force in shaping an inclusive, tolerant, and patriotic young generation.

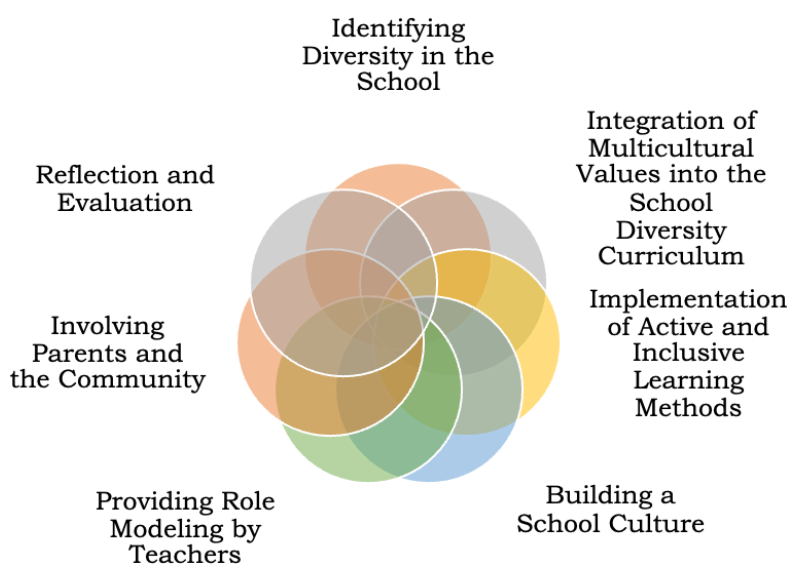


Figure 2. Steps for Implementing Multicultural Education
Source: Compiled by the author, 2025

Challenges and Solutions in the Implementation of Multicultural Education

The implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools faces a number of complex challenges, both structural and cultural. One of the main challenges is the continued dominance of majority cultures in teaching materials and classroom practices, causing students from minority groups to often feel unrepresented.

In addition, many teachers lack sufficient understanding and training in multicultural approaches, which leads them to teach using conventional methods without considering the diverse backgrounds of their students. The social environment also plays a role there is still a

perception among some segments of society that discussing differences in religion, ethnicity, or culture in schools may trigger conflict, making the multicultural approach seem sensitive or controversial.

On the other hand, the lack of policies that technically regulate the implementation of multicultural values in elementary schools causes its application to be sporadic and heavily dependent on the personal initiative of teachers or school principals. Another significant challenge is the absence of clear measurement tools to assess students' attitudinal changes toward diversity, making it difficult to determine the effectiveness of the multicultural education being implemented.

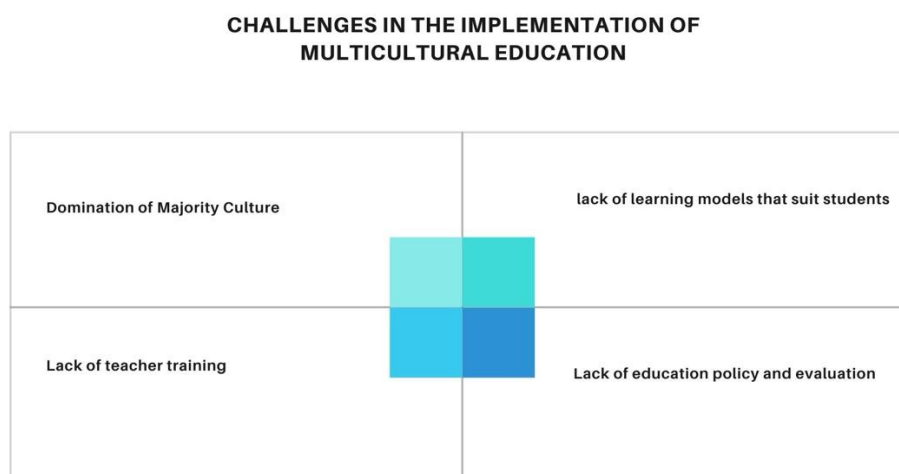


Figure 3. Challenges in the Implementation of Multicultural Education
Source: Compiled by the author (2025)

In facing these challenges, various strategic steps need to be taken to strengthen the implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools. First, the government and educational institutions must develop curricula and textbooks that are representative of all cultural groups in Indonesia, so that students feel their identities are respected. Second, teachers should receive continuous training and professional development to effectively manage inclusive classrooms and understand the dynamics of student diversity. Third, schools can foster an open and tolerant school culture through activities such as Cultural Day, interfaith dialogues, and the integration of diversity-related symbols in the school environment. Fourth, it is essential to involve parents and community leaders to support multicultural education as a shared value, not just the responsibility of the school. Finally, schools need to develop evaluation instruments to assess students' attitudes toward diversity, such as observing tolerant behaviors, assessing cross-cultural projects, and student reflections on multicultural activities. With the right and comprehensive solutions, multicultural education can become a major force in shaping inclusive student character and upholding unity in diversity.

Discussion

Multicultural education plays a central role in shaping the character of elementary school students to become tolerant and inclusive individuals. Based on the theoretical framework of Banks (2006); Sitanggang et al. (2025), multicultural education is not limited to introducing different cultures, but also aims to develop attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable students to ethically participate in a diverse society. In Indonesia's pluralistic society, this approach becomes a

vital foundation for developing understanding of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, referring to the theories of social development by Erik Erikson and cognitive development by Jean Piaget, elementary school age is a crucial phase in forming social and moral identity. Therefore, systematically integrated multicultural education forms the basis for instilling tolerance and empathy.

Strategies for implementing multicultural education in the context of elementary schools must address three main elements: curriculum, teaching methods, and the school environment. An inclusive curriculum reflects the representation of local and national cultures in learning materials. As emphasized Alghamdi (2025), a multicultural curriculum should provide expressive space for all cultural groups. For instance, folktales from various regions can be incorporated into Indonesian language lessons, while traditional games can be part of extracurricular activities. Active learning methods such as cross-cultural discussions, social case studies, and collaborative projects between students of different backgrounds have been shown to foster awareness of tolerance. An inclusive school culture can be developed through activities such as Culture Days, interregional art exhibitions, and visual symbols of diversity within the school environment. The table below summarizes key strategies and implementation examples:

Table 1. Strategies and implementation Multicultural Education

Strategy	Example Implementation
Curriculum Integration	Folktales from various regions in Indonesian language lessons
Active and Inclusive Methods	Cultural collaboration projects, identity-crossing role-plays
School Culture Development	Culture Day, regional symbols, local art competitions
Teacher Role Modeling	Fair behavior, non-discriminatory, providing equal voice
Parental & Community Involvement	Cultural festivals, interfaith dialogue, traditional leader visits

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025

The urgency of multicultural education continues to rise amidst growing intolerance and social stereotypes. Elementary-aged children, according to Minnett, Vandell, and Santrock (1983), are in the phase of building social identity and concrete cognitive understanding, making this period critical for instilling inclusive values. Multicultural education helps children avoid exclusivity and social prejudice by instilling empathy, social justice, and critical consciousness from an early age. Aligned with the values of the "Profil Pelajar Pancasila" in the Merdeka Curriculum, global diversity is a core character expected in Indonesia's national education system. Thus, multicultural education is not only pedagogically relevant but also a strategic tool for strengthening national identity (Minnett et al. 1983).

Despite its potential, the implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools faces various challenges (Connor, Danforth, and Gallagher 2025; Dunham and Oti 2025). The dominance of the majority culture in teaching materials, lack of teacher training on multicultural approaches, and societal concerns about discussing differences remain significant obstacles. Additionally, the absence of systematic evaluation instruments to assess students' attitude changes toward diversity is another limitation. To address these challenges, strategic steps must be taken, such as developing representative curricula, multicultural-based teacher training, strengthening an open school culture, and involving parents and community leaders. Evaluations using cross-cultural project rubrics and behavioral observations can serve as effective measurement tools.

These strategies align with Paulo Freire's concept of education as a process of social transformation, positioning students as agents of change.

In conclusion, multicultural education is an urgent necessity within Indonesia's elementary education system. With a comprehensive implementation strategy, this form of education can foster a young generation that is not only academically intelligent but also socially and emotionally mature. Multicultural education can be a powerful force in building a democratic society that values mutual respect and upholds unity in diversity. Therefore, synergy among the government, schools, teachers, parents, and the wider community is essential to ensure that multicultural values are genuinely lived and internalized by students from an early age.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education plays a vital role in shaping elementary school students into tolerant, inclusive individuals who uphold unity in diversity. In Indonesia's multicultural society, values such as justice, respect for differences, and national identity must be instilled early through formal education. Elementary school is a crucial starting point, as this is the stage when students are forming their social and moral identities. Through implementation strategies that include inclusive curriculum integration, active learning methods, the development of a school culture that embraces diversity, and exemplary behavior from educators, multicultural education can be meaningfully brought to life in everyday school practices. However, the successful implementation of multicultural education also faces several challenges. Limited teacher training, the dominance of majority cultures in teaching materials, and the lack of tools to evaluate students' attitudes are obstacles that must be collectively addressed. Therefore, strategic and collaborative solutions are needed among the government, schools, teachers, parents, and communities. Multicultural-based teacher training, the development of representative curricula, and the involvement of local communities in school activities are concrete steps that can strengthen multicultural education at the elementary level. With proper and comprehensive implementation, multicultural education not only promotes tolerance but also reinforces social cohesion and helps build a young generation prepared to live in a pluralistic and democratic society. Hence, multicultural education is not merely a discourse it is an urgent necessity to strengthen Indonesia's unity in diversity.

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