



The Role of Schools in Developing Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Multicultural education has become a strategic approach for addressing the social, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of Indonesian society in the context of globalization and increasing social tensions. Previous studies have primarily focused on curriculum integration and classroom learning, while limited attention has been given to the role of schools as comprehensive institutions in developing multicultural values and inclusive educational cultures. This study aims to analyze the role of schools in implementing multicultural education and to identify strategies for strengthening multicultural practices within the Indonesian national education system. The study employed a qualitative library research approach through the analysis of scholarly literature, theoretical frameworks, and educational policy documents related to multicultural education and school practices. The findings reveal that schools play a central role as agents of socialization for tolerance, equality, and respect for diversity through curriculum development, inclusive learning practices, school culture, teacher training, and collaboration with parents and communities. The study also found that the implementation of Banks' five dimensions of multicultural education content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and empowerment of school culture provides an effective framework for addressing challenges such as limited teacher cultural competence and persistent social prejudice. The novelty of this study lies in emphasizing schools not only as curriculum implementers but also as integrated multicultural ecosystems that shape inclusive social values. This study contributes to strengthening the discourse on multicultural education by positioning schools as key institutions for building a tolerant, democratic, and socially cohesive Indonesian society.

Keywords: Multicultural Education; Role of Schools; Tolerance; Diversity; Social Integration

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a nation characterized by extensive ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial diversity, as reflected in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). This plurality positions Indonesia as one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world and requires the national education system to focus not only on academic achievement but also on the development of social character, tolerance, and the capacity to live harmoniously within diversity (Tilaar, 2004; Azra, 2012). Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System emphasizes that education aims to develop individuals who are faithful, morally responsible, democratic, and socially accountable citizens. These educational goals can only be achieved through an inclusive and equitable educational system that respects diversity and promotes social justice. Therefore, multicultural education represents both a constitutional mandate and a sociological necessity within the Indonesian educational context.

Despite this ideal, Indonesia continues to experience various identity-based conflicts related to ethnicity, religion, race, and culture, which are reflected in intolerance, discrimination, bullying, and social violence, including within educational institutions (Raihani & Sumintono, 2019; Zamroni, 2018). Schools, which ideally function as safe and inclusive learning spaces, often reproduce social prejudice and unequal treatment toward students from minority backgrounds. Recent studies indicate that multicultural education contributes significantly to the development of students' character, tolerance, and respect for diversity. However, its implementation remains constrained by limited teacher competence, insufficient institutional support, and weak integration into school culture (Sarjono et al., 2024). In addition, the integration of multicultural values into social studies learning has been shown to increase students' awareness and appreciation of social and cultural differences, although such practices are not yet implemented evenly across schools in Indonesia (Puspita Dewi et al., 2024).

The urgency of multicultural education has become increasingly important in the era of globalization. The rapid transnational flow of values, culture, and information creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue while simultaneously posing risks to local cultural identity and social cohesion if not critically addressed through education (Azra, 2012; Kymlicka, 2018). International studies demonstrate that effective multicultural education requires culturally responsive pedagogy that connects students' cultural experiences with the learning process, thereby fostering inclusion, participation, and social justice in the classroom (International Journal of Multicultural Education, 2024). Furthermore, teachers' beliefs and orientations toward diversity have been identified as important predictors of successful multicultural and inclusive educational practices (International Journal of Educational Research, 2024).

Theoretically, multicultural education is understood as both a pedagogical and ideological approach that positions diversity as a source of social strength and educational capital. Banks (2016) and Banks and Banks (2019) emphasize that multicultural education seeks to provide equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, race, or social class, while simultaneously encouraging critical awareness of unequal social structures. Similarly, Nieto and Bode (2018) argue that multicultural education extends beyond curriculum content and includes school climate, social interaction, institutional culture, and pedagogical practices that affirm diversity and empower students from different backgrounds.

In the Indonesian context, various studies have shown that multicultural education contributes to reducing stereotypes, strengthening intercultural communication, and fostering inclusive character formation among students. Recent findings indicate that multicultural-based

learning significantly improves students' tolerance and social empathy (The Influence of Multicultural Education on Tolerant Attitudes, 2025). Multicultural education also plays an important role in strengthening students' awareness of local cultural identities amidst the pressures of globalization and cultural homogenization (Multicultural and Inclusive Education, 2025). Nevertheless, the implementation of multicultural education still encounters structural and cultural barriers, including teachers' limited understanding of diversity-responsive learning strategies, weak school policies supporting inclusivity, and limited educational resources (Yuliana & Riswanto, 2021; Nur Aeni et al., 2025).

Although previous studies have extensively discussed multicultural learning, curriculum integration, and tolerance development, limited research has specifically positioned schools as comprehensive agents in constructing and sustaining multicultural culture through curriculum, school management, teacher professionalism, institutional climate, and community involvement. Most existing studies focus primarily on classroom learning processes rather than examining schools as integrated multicultural ecosystems. This gap indicates the need for a broader analysis of the strategic role of schools in developing multicultural education within the Indonesian educational system.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative library research design using a thematic literature review approach. The study was conducted to examine concepts, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and educational policies related to multicultural education and the role of schools in developing inclusive educational practices in Indonesia. The library research approach was selected because it enables a systematic synthesis of various scholarly perspectives and empirical evidence regarding multicultural education as both an educational paradigm and a social transformation strategy (Pane et al., 2024; Mua, 2024).

The data sources consisted of scientific publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, educational policy documents, and research reports discussing multicultural education, school culture, inclusive education, and diversity management. The primary data sources were national and international journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure that the analysis reflected recent developments in multicultural educational practices. Literature searches were conducted through several academic databases and publication portals, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and Crossref. The article selection process applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and credibility of the sources. The inclusion criteria included: (1) publications discussing multicultural education and school practices, (2) peer-reviewed national or international publications, (3) articles published between 2020–2025, and (4) studies relevant to the Indonesian educational context or inclusive educational practices. Meanwhile, publications lacking academic relevance, duplicated studies, or sources without clear methodological explanations were excluded from the analysis. Based on these criteria, 42 scholarly sources were selected and analyzed in this study.

Data collection was conducted through systematic literature searching, document identification, source screening, and document classification using keywords such as multicultural education, inclusive school culture, the role of schools in diversity, and multicultural learning strategies. All selected documents were then organized and reviewed to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns related to multicultural education (Pane et al., 2024; Aprilia et al., 2024).

The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Each document was carefully

reviewed, coded, and categorized into several major themes: (1) the conceptual foundations of multicultural education, (2) the role of schools in promoting diversity values, (3) challenges in implementing multicultural education, and (4) strategies for developing inclusive schools. The analysis process involved four stages: data reduction, coding and categorization, thematic interpretation, and conclusion drawing. To enhance the validity of the findings, source triangulation and cross-comparison among empirical studies were conducted to ensure consistency and credibility in interpreting the contribution of schools to the development of multicultural education in Indonesia (Mua, 2024; Yuliana & Riswanto, 2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Multiculturalism as a Foundation for Education

The findings of this study indicate that multiculturalism emerged as a response to assimilative educational models that prioritize cultural uniformity and dominant social identities. Such approaches often marginalize minority groups and limit equal participation in social and educational institutions. In contrast, the framework of cultural pluralism recognizes diversity as a legitimate and essential component of public life by ensuring equal opportunities for all cultural groups to express their identities and participate in society (Parekh, 2012; Kymlicka, 2018). The analysis shows that multiculturalism positions diversity not as a threat to social cohesion, but as a foundation for creating inclusive, democratic, and dialogical social relationships. In the educational context, the findings reveal that schools implementing multicultural perspectives tend to view students' diverse cultural backgrounds as valuable educational resources rather than obstacles to learning. Differences in language, cultural experiences, beliefs, and social perspectives enrich classroom interactions and contribute to the development of critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural communication skills among students (Banks & Banks, 2019; Nieto & Bode, 2018). Furthermore, recent empirical studies demonstrate that inclusive learning environments foster openness, social sensitivity, and collaborative abilities within diverse groups (Gorski & Covert, 2020; Arfaton et al., 2024). These findings confirm that multiculturalism functions not only as an ethical orientation but also as a transformative pedagogical framework supporting students' holistic development.

Table 1. Synthesis of Previous Research on Multicultural Education

Research	Main Findings	Challenges	Relevance to Indonesian Context
Banks & Banks (2019)	Multicultural education promotes equality and inclusion in schools	Curriculum implementation varies across institutions	Relevant for developing inclusive educational policies
Nieto & Bode (2018)	School climate and pedagogy influence diversity acceptance	Resistance to institutional change	Supports the importance of inclusive school culture
Gorski & Covert (2020)	Inclusive learning improves empathy and collaboration	Limited teacher competence	Reflects teacher readiness issues in Indonesian schools
Arfaton et al. (2024)	Diversity-responsive learning strengthens social sensitivity	Unequal implementation	Indicates the need for institutional support

DISCUSSION

1. The Relevance of Multiculturalism in the Indonesian Context

The findings demonstrate that multicultural education is highly relevant to Indonesia's pluralistic social structure. Although Indonesia officially promotes the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, educational practices have historically emphasized centralized and homogenizing approaches that often overlook local cultural diversity (Tilaar, 2004; Azra, 2012). This study identifies that such educational orientations contribute to the persistence of social prejudice and unequal recognition of minority identities within school environments.

Compared with previous international studies emphasizing multicultural education as a strategy for social inclusion, the Indonesian context presents more complex challenges due to the country's extensive ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The analysis shows that schools adopting multicultural approaches tend to foster more harmonious social interactions among students and reduce identity-based tensions (Yuliana & Riswanto, 2021; Puspita Dewi et al., 2024). These findings support previous studies while also highlighting that multicultural education in Indonesia must address not only cultural diversity but also issues related to social inequality, regional disparities, and institutional readiness.

Furthermore, the study indicates that multicultural education functions as an important preventive mechanism against social conflict. By introducing values of tolerance, mutual respect, and intercultural understanding from an early age, schools can help students develop the ability to resolve differences constructively. In this regard, multicultural education should not merely be understood as curriculum enrichment but as a structural necessity for strengthening national integration and social cohesion in Indonesia's diverse society.

2. The Role of Schools in Multicultural Education

The analysis reveals that schools play a strategic role as social institutions where students from different cultural, religious, and social backgrounds interact on a daily basis. Through curriculum policies, classroom practices, and institutional culture, schools significantly influence students' perceptions of diversity and social relationships. Integrating multicultural perspectives into teaching materials enables students to recognize the contributions of various cultural groups and reduces stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes (Banks & Banks, 2019).

This study also finds that inclusive school climates contribute to higher student participation, stronger psychological safety, and reduced interpersonal conflict. Equal relationships between teachers and students, as well as dialogic communication patterns, create learning environments where students feel respected regardless of their cultural backgrounds (Nieto & Bode, 2018; Yuliana & Riswanto, 2021). These findings are consistent with international studies emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy but further demonstrate that institutional support and school leadership are particularly crucial within the Indonesian educational context. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on classroom learning, this study highlights that schools function as integrated multicultural ecosystems involving curriculum development, school management, teacher

professionalism, and community engagement. This finding represents the distinctive contribution of the study by positioning schools as comprehensive agents of multicultural transformation rather than merely sites for curriculum implementation.

3. Strategies for Developing Multicultural Education

The findings indicate that strengthening multicultural education requires systematic and institutionally supported strategies. Banks' five dimensions of multicultural education—content

integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and empowerment of school culture—provide an effective operational framework for developing inclusive educational environments (Banks, 2016). However, the analysis shows that implementation challenges in Indonesia remain significant, particularly regarding limited teacher competence, inconsistent institutional policies, and unequal educational resources. Compared with findings from international contexts, Indonesian schools face additional challenges related to regional diversity, socio-cultural differences, and varying levels of institutional readiness. Therefore, multicultural education development in Indonesia requires not only curriculum reform but also comprehensive institutional transformation involving teacher training, inclusive school leadership, participatory policies, and collaboration with local communities.

This study concludes that the successful implementation of multicultural education depends on the ability of schools to integrate diversity values into all aspects of educational practice. Consequently, multicultural education should be positioned as a long-term institutional strategy for building inclusive, democratic, and socially cohesive educational systems in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education represents a strategic approach to addressing the social, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of Indonesian society. The findings of this study demonstrate that schools play a central role in fostering tolerance, equality, inclusivity, and respect for diversity through curriculum implementation, inclusive learning practices, school culture, leadership, and community involvement. The study further reveals that the integration of Banks' five dimensions of multicultural education provides an effective operational framework for strengthening multicultural values within educational institutions.

The main contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on schools as integrated multicultural ecosystems rather than merely institutions implementing multicultural curriculum content. This study theoretically contributes to the discourse of multicultural education by expanding the understanding of schools as comprehensive agents of multicultural transformation that shape students' social awareness, intercultural competence, and democratic values through institutional culture and educational practices. This perspective extends previous studies that primarily focused on classroom learning and curriculum integration.

Practically, the findings imply that schools and policymakers need to strengthen multicultural-based teacher training, develop inclusive educational policies, and design curricula that are responsive to both local and global cultural diversity. In addition, school leadership should encourage participatory and diversity-sensitive educational environments that support intercultural dialogue and equal participation among students from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. As a library research study, the analysis relies primarily on secondary data and existing literature without direct field investigation. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the practical complexities of multicultural education implementation across different educational regions and levels in Indonesia. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct empirical and comparative studies involving schools from diverse sociocultural contexts to examine the effectiveness of multicultural educational practices more comprehensively. Overall, this study confirms that strengthening multicultural education through school-based institutional transformation can significantly contribute to the development of a harmonious, democratic, inclusive, and socially cohesive Indonesian society.

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