

## Multicultural Education is a Strategy for Building Social Harmony Amidst the Diversity of Cultural and Religious Identities in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*Indonesia as a multicultural country consisting of various ethnicities, religions, races and cultures faces great challenges in building social harmony amidst inherent differences. Multicultural education exists as a strategic approach in responding to this challenge by instilling the values of tolerance, respect for differences and social justice from an early age. This article examines the role of multicultural education in the Indonesian national context, by highlighting inclusive educational policies, curricula and pedagogical practices in the school environment. The method used is a literature review with a descriptive qualitative approach. The results of the study show that the consistent implementation of multicultural education can strengthen national identity, reduce the potential for horizontal conflict, and create space for healthy dialogue between communities. However, challenges still arise in the form of cultural resistance, minimal teacher training, and limited adaptive curriculum. Therefore, synergy is needed between the government, educators and society in creating harmony in diversity through a humanist and transformative education system.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country that has two-thirds of its territory in the form of ocean, namely 6.32 km<sup>2</sup> (six point thirty-two million square kilometers), 17,504 (seventeen thousand five hundred and four) islands and is one of the countries that has the second longest coastline in the world after Canada, namely 99,093 km<sup>2</sup> (ninety-nine thousand and ninety-three square kilometers). In addition, geographically Indonesia is located between two continents, namely the Asian Continent and the Australian Continent and two oceans, namely The Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are the most dynamic areas in the world, both economically and politically. This strategic geographic location makes Indonesia have advantages and at the same time a high dependence on maritime affairs (Soemarmi, Indarti, Pujiyono, & Diamantina, 2019). by society.

The cultural diversity possessed by the Indonesian nation is certainly not only seen in terms of strength, but can have implications for the emergence of conflicts based on cultural differences. Because basically cultural diversity has implications for thought patterns, behavior, and character that live as traditions in people's lives (Prasetiawati, 2017). Intercultural struggles provide opportunities for conflict when there is no mutual respect, communication, tolerance, harmonization, and mutual respect for each other.

Multicultural education becomes very relevant amidst the diversity inherent in Indonesian society. As a country with diverse ethnicities, cultures, religions and languages, multicultural education plays an important role in strengthening national identity by instilling mutual respect and tolerance between citizens. Apart from that, this

education is a strategic instrument in reducing horizontal conflicts that often arise due to social and cultural differences, by building understanding and appreciation for this diversity. Furthermore, multicultural education provides a space for healthy dialogue between communities, enabling constructive and harmonious interactions amidst the plurality of society. However, the implementation of multicultural education cannot be free from various challenges, ranging from cultural resistance to limited resources, which need to be overcome so that the goals of this education can be achieved optimally. Thus, discussing the role, benefits and challenges of multicultural education is very important for creating an inclusive and civilized society.

## 2. RESEARCH METODE

This research uses a literature study method. Literature study research can be interpreted as an arrangement or series of research related to the collection of library data sources, which are managed systematically, critical, and objective related to the concept and implementation of education multicultural. This research is basically not much different from other research, The only difference is the method in which the data is collected from reading sources based on previous research, with the aim of obtaining results the maximum. The analysis technique in this research is content analysis, where this can be done interpreted as a process of systematically searching and compiling data obtained, so that it can be easily understood and published to general audience. In general, the technique used is by analyzing the results research according to their order, such as most relevant, relevant, least relevant, taking into account the most recent to oldest research years.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1 The role of multicultural education in strengthening national identity

Multicultural education is an approach that emphasizes the importance of recognizing, respecting, and understanding cultural diversity in society. The multicultural approach in education aims to develop an attitude of inclusiveness, tolerance, and mutual respect among students from different cultural backgrounds. Multicultural education can be a solid foundation for building a sense of nationalism among the younger generation. By introducing students to the diverse cultures that exist in Indonesia, multicultural education helps them to understand and appreciate the cultural richness of their country. (Hasnah et al., 2024)

Multicultural education is one of the effective methods to foster a sense of love for the homeland and a spirit of nationalism among the younger generation. In Indonesia, nationalism is very important to maintain unity and oneness amidst the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. The sense of nationalism in Indonesia is reflected in the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika," which means "Different but still one." This motto emphasizes the importance of maintaining unity in diversity. Nationalism is a social construct that connects individuals with the national community through various symbols, historical stories, and shared identities. Nationalism includes a sense of love for the homeland, pride in national identity, and a commitment to defending and advancing the country. Multicultural education can be a solid foundation for building nationalism among the younger generation. By introducing students to the various cultures that exist in Indonesia, multicultural education helps them understand and appreciate the cultural richness of the nation. (Hasnah et al., 2024)

Multicultural attitudes should be built and encouraged from an early age. Integrating various topics into multicultural education is an effective way to instill this attitude in every lesson. Teachers have the opportunity to include multicultural content in math and science lessons. The insertion of multicultural education into the curriculum and teaching and learning process can help students understand, appreciate, and celebrate the cultural diversity found in Indonesia. Through inclusive and collaborative learning, students can create strong relationships with their friends, overcome stereotypes, and build a strong national identity. Various strategies and approaches are needed in introducing multicultural education. The goal is that students can easily understand the essence of multicultural education. The role of teachers as educators is very important for the success of multicultural education, because students tend to imitate the examples and behaviors of teachers, which is in line with improving teacher professionalism through multicultural education and development activities that can make learning more valuable. (Huda et al., 2023)

Diversity in a community that is not handled properly can be a source of social problems such as conflict among the community. Social conflict is a social interaction in the form of conflict, where there is an effort to eliminate each other between the parties involved. Multicultural education as an idea that offers an understanding of life that respects, appreciates, and tolerates differences in society, can reduce clashes that arise due to individual differences, so that the conflicts that occur can be managed properly. Culturally diverse education gives students the opportunity to grow not only in academics, but also in character development in a more positive direction. This always emphasizes the importance of mutual respect above all else, without limiting existing diversity. The implementation of multicultural education is considered an effort to educate and provide enlightenment for the life of the nation, by resolving social conflicts innovatively. Thus, conflict can be a trigger for change and improvement in people's lives. It is hoped that multicultural education can be a solution that connects peace in dealing with social conflict and problems of disharmony that exist in Indonesian society, such as attitudes of discrimination and intolerance. (Diyah Lestari et al., n.d.)

Education that emphasizes multiculturalism has a very essential role in creating harmony and unity in a diverse society. In Indonesia, with its many tribes, religions, and traditions, multicultural education is a key element in building mutually supportive relationships among citizens. The diversity that exists in Indonesia can be a trigger for conflict that leads to violence, destruction, arson, persecution, attacks, intimidation, and often ends in arrests. This often leads to inequality in various aspects of society, differences in the economy, and debates between minority and majority groups, indigenous and non-indigenous people, and various issues related to Tribe, Religion, Race, and Inter-Group (SARA). (Wales, 2022)

Multiculturalism will serve as a bridge that can encompass the various differences that exist in Indonesia, including those related to local traditions. This multicultural education is one effective way to reduce the possibility of conflict. By implementing multicultural education, Indonesian society can understand, accept, and appreciate the various differences between existing groups. Multicultural education can help strengthen a sense of unity amidst diversity and create a more tolerant society. (Anam & Marlina, 2022) Multicultural education that is implemented in daily activities at school can increase students' awareness of the importance of tolerance towards religion and culture. This can be seen in various activities involving students from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. (Aisyah et al., 2024)

Multicultural education provides a very important foundation for students to be actively and positively involved in diverse communities. They not only gain insight into cultural variations, but also develop the attitudes and skills needed to appreciate differences and build respectful relationships with others. Students are encouraged to appreciate differences and view them as a wealth, rather than a challenge. In addition, they are equipped with the ability to communicate and interact with individuals from various backgrounds in an effective manner. The learning process is designed to encourage intercultural understanding, respect for diversity, and foster empathy and curiosity towards different cultures. (Aidar Idrus et al., 2024)

### **3.2. Multicultural Education as an Effort to Reduce Horizontal Conflict**

Multicultural education functions strategically in preventing horizontal conflicts caused by differences in ethnicity, religion, race, and social groups in Indonesia. At the elementary school level, the implementation of a multicultural curriculum integrated into various subjects has proven effective in forming children's awareness from an early age to appreciate diversity. Literature studies in elementary schools show that teaching inclusive values reduces prejudice and increases mutual respect among students (Huda, 2023).

Conceptually, multicultural education teaches that diversity is a will that must be respected, not shunned, thereby strengthening social cohesion and reducing the potential for identity-based conflict. At the curriculum and religious institution levels, the integration of religious moderation values (tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh) in the learning process helps create a more tolerant and anti-violent society (Harahap, 2025). In addition, literature review shows that multicultural education has the potential to be the main mediator in resolving cultural conflicts through an inclusive and social approach in the form of intercultural dialogue, diversity policies, and the involvement of various stakeholders. This approach can reduce negative prejudice and build social harmony based on respect for differences. Furthermore, this type of education also plays a role in strengthening national integration, instilling the values of pluralism, democracy, and humanism as a foundation for maintaining the integrity of the Republic of Indonesia and fortifying society from horizontal conflict. Thus, multicultural education is not only a theoretical approach, but a practical framework that has been proven to be able to form an inclusive, tolerant, and resistant society to identity conflicts. The strategy for developing multicultural education at the regional level, such as in West Java, shows that the success of the program is highly dependent on the synergy between various components of teachers, students, parents, community leaders, and the government in designing curriculum, modules, and practical activities (seminars, campaign media, workshops) that are relevant to local conditions. In a qualitative study, it was found that this model fosters an attitude of mutual respect, reduces prejudice, and strengthens the spirit of maintaining the integrity of the Republic of Indonesia, although capacity building is still needed to instill these values sustainably in the daily lives of the people of West Java (Hisny, 2020).

Educational transformation that replaces the monocultural paradigm with multiculturalism includes the preparation of teaching materials and teaching methods that encourage critical awareness of discrimination and prejudice, and form citizens who are sensitive to diversity. At the community level, an inclusive approach through cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic activities studied in the literature shows its effectiveness in reducing cultural conflict and building social harmony, especially when supported by public policies that welcome community participation (Abdulloh, 2023).

In addition, a literature review on basic education emphasizes that early internalization will inhibit the formation of negative stereotypes which then become the root of horizontal conflict so that multicultural programs must be continued with consistency and sustainable structure. This approach not only increases tolerance values in schools, but also instills Pancasila values and inclusive nationalism which are effective bulwarks against social fragmentation, in accordance with the findings of the national literature review.

### 3.3 Challenges in implementing multicultural education

Multicultural education is an educational approach that seeks to recognize, understand and appreciate cultural diversity and learning processes. The aim is not only limited to introducing various cultural backgrounds but also as a form of creating social harmony amidst the existing diversity. However, in practice, the implementation of multicultural education in Indonesia still faces various complex, interrelated challenges.

One of the main challenges is the lack of understanding and competence of teachers in managing diversity in the classroom. Many teachers do not have adequate training in multicultural pedagogy, both in terms of theory and practice. This causes learning to still be dominated by a homogeneous approach and tends to ignore the diversity of students. The study conducted by Sari et al. (2022) shows that most teachers are not familiar with learning strategies that are sensitive to cultural contexts, so they have difficulty integrating multiculturalism values in the curriculum and teaching and learning activities.

Apart from that, limited resources such as textbooks, contextual learning modules, and supporting facilities are significant obstacles. Many teaching materials are still centralized and do not represent local cultural diversity. This is exacerbated by \*homogeneous social environmental conditions\*, especially in rural and remote areas, which make students less exposed to the reality of diversity, so they tend to form a narrow view of differences.

The next challenge is the low level of public awareness, including parents, of the importance of multicultural education. Many still think that learning should be neutral and does not need to include issues of diversity, even though understanding plurality is an important foundation in building a harmonious society. The low level of active participation from parents and the community also reflects the absence of strong collaboration between schools and the community in supporting multicultural values (Ramadani & Wahyudi, 2023).

Socio-economic disparities are also a factor that exacerbates unequal access to quality multicultural education. Schools in remote areas often do not have trained teaching staff or adequate infrastructure. This creates disparities in students' experiences and understanding of the values of diversity, which ultimately widens the gap between the center and regions in terms of multicultural awareness.

No less important, resistance to multicultural values from some groups in society is also a serious challenge. Some parties see multiculturalism as a threat to local identity or certain religious values. This view often arises from ignorance and prejudice towards "others", and is reinforced by intolerant narratives that develop in public spaces and social media (Zahra & Lubis, 2021).

To answer these various challenges, a comprehensive approach is needed. Continuous teacher training on multicultural education needs to be a priority. The curriculum must also be overhauled to be more inclusive, involving local and global perspectives that reflect the diversity of national identities. The government and educational institutions need to provide representative and adaptive learning resources, as well as strengthen cross-sector collaboration with parents, community leaders and social organizations. Ultimately, the implementation of multicultural education in Indonesia is not only the responsibility of educational institutions, but is a collective agenda in building a nation with civility and character. Only by respecting differences and using them as strengths, can Indonesia realize the ideal of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in its education system.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Multicultural education is very important in Indonesia to strengthen national identity by respecting ethnic, racial and class diversity. It is a systematic strategy to reconcile differences and prevent horizontal conflicts caused by prejudice and injustice. Multicultural education builds awareness of tolerance, empathy, and social justice through inclusive curricula, intercultural dialogue, and teacher training. This creates a space for healthy dialogue in schools as a miniature plural society, where understanding and acceptance of differences is key. However, its implementation faces challenges such as: Lack of teacher understanding in managing diverse classes. Low public awareness of the importance of multicultural education. Communication problems between cultural groups that hinder the educational process.

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