

The Role of Teachers as Mediators in Reducing Verbal Bullying of Minority Ethnic Students at Swabina Karya Junior High School, Medan

Shufiatul Ihda

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan
shufiatul0331233004@uinsu.ac.id

Muhammad Fajar Rasyiid Siregar

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan
fajarrasyiid123@gmail.com

Susi Susanti

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan
suisusantisrg1@gmail.com

Meyniar Albina

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan
albinaameyniar@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Shufiatul Ihda

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of ethnic-based verbal bullying in a multicultural junior high school setting in Indonesia, focusing on the experiences of teachers at SMP Swasta Swabina Karya Medan. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis involving seven purposively selected participants—five subject teachers, one guidance counselor, and the principal. The study followed Moustakas' phenomenological procedures, enabling the identification of core themes related to teachers' mediation strategies, integration of tolerance values into pedagogy, and institutional challenges in fostering multicultural understanding. Findings reveal that verbal bullying targeting minority students significantly impacts their psychological, social, and academic well-being, often underestimated by peers as mere jest. Teachers played a pivotal role as mediators, utilizing open dialogue, promoting inclusivity, and implementing intervention programs rooted in multicultural education. These strategies were found effective in mitigating bullying incidents and enhancing interethnic harmony. The study emphasizes the importance of institutional commitment through regular educational programs on diversity, strengthened school-parent collaboration, provision of counseling services, and ongoing evaluation of anti-bullying policies. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of ethnic relations in schools and offers practical implications for educators and policymakers to build more inclusive educational environments.

Keywords: Teacher's Role; Verbal Bullying; Minority Tribe.

Introduction

Indonesia is one of the most pluralistic countries in the world, with a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religions united in the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. Based on 2010 population census data, more than 1,340 ethnic groups and 1,941 intangible cultural works spread from Sabang to Merauke.¹ This diversity creates social complexity that requires harmonization and internalization of tolerance values from an early age, especially in the educational environment.² However, the digital era, characterized by the rapid flow of information, has also contributed to the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, and identity-based intolerance. One form of this is verbal bullying against students from ethnic minorities, which is still rampant in schools.³

Education experts assert that multicultural education is essential for shaping an inclusive and just society. Banks argues that multicultural education is not just a recognition of cultural differences, but a transformation of curriculum, policies, and learning practices to create social justice.⁴ In the Indonesian context, Suhendi stated that multicultural education must be synergized with the values of spirituality and social harmony that have become the nation's cultural heritage.⁵ Khalim and Parut added that multicultural-based inclusive education programs effectively build understanding and respect between ethnic groups, especially in madrasahs.⁶

Although the urgency of multicultural education has been widely voiced, the reality in schools shows that ethnic-based verbal bullying is still a serious problem.⁷ Students from the majority group often make discriminatory jokes against students from ethnic minorities. This behavior can be seen in the case of SMP Swasta Swabina Karya, where the majority of students make ethnic-based jokes against Chinese students and other

¹Akhsan Na'im and Hendry Syaputra, "Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama Dan Bahasa Sehari-Hari Penduduk Indonesia Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010," *Jakarta: Badan Pusat Statistik*, 2011.

²Nopri Dwi Siswanto, Uus Ruswandi, and Mohamad Erihadiana, "Internalization OF Multicultural Educational Values in Prospective Transformative Islamic Education in Madrasah Aliyah Miftahul Falah Gedebage Bandung," *FIKROTUNA: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Manajemen Islam* 12, no. 01 (2023).

³Firman Alamasyah Mansyur et al., "Indonesian Linguistics and Culture Training: Building Bridges of Cross-Cultural Understanding from an Early Age," *Room of Civil Society Development* 4, no. 1 (2025): 109–19.

⁴James A Banks and Cherry A McGee. Banks, *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, 2004.

⁵Saca Suhendi et al., "Hasyim Asy'ari's Dimensions of Multicultural Spiritual Leadership: Harmony in Education and Society in Indonesia," *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 9, no. 1 (2025): 1–27.

⁶Ahmad Dwi Nur Khalim and Wensislaut Parut, "Paradigma and Programs Multicultural Education in Inclusive Madrasah," *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2025): 28–44.

⁷Christina Salmivalli, "Participant Roles in Bullying: How Can Peer Bystanders Be Utilized in Interventions?," *Theory into Practice* 53, no. 4 (2014): 286–92.

ethnic groups. If left unchecked, this practice will widen the social gap and trigger exclusive attitudes and intolerance among students.⁸ Therefore, Michael Fullan believes that teachers' role is vital as social mediators and value agents to respond to these conditions through pedagogical approaches sensitive to diversity.⁹

Several previous studies have highlighted the role of multicultural education in shaping tolerance attitudes in schools. Wicaksono found that students from ethnic minorities are more vulnerable to bullying and social exclusion.¹⁰ Meanwhile, research by Lubis shows that although Pancasila education has contained values of diversity, its implementation has not been optimal in preventing discriminatory behavior.¹¹ Fahmi emphasizes the importance of a faith-based approach in strengthening social cohesion, but this approach has not been able to eliminate the practice of verbal bullying directly.¹² Arfaton, in a high school study, found that integrating multicultural education can shape tolerant characters, but did not detail the concrete strategies of teachers in the micro-pedagogical context.¹³ On the other hand, Musa presents a teacher strategy approach in a multicultural classroom, but it is still descriptive without discussing teacher responses to specific cases of verbal bullying. This lacuna is the gap for this research to expand the study space.¹⁴

This research comes with a different approach from previous studies. The primary focus of this study is to identify and analyze teachers' strategies in dealing with ethnic-based verbal bullying in a high-diversity school. This approach not only captures the social conditions of students but also explores in depth the steps teachers take in building

⁸Noor Azida Batubara and Ahmad Dasuki, "Transformation of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Schools Facing the Challenges of Globalization and Multiculturalism," *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025): 650–61.

⁹Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Teachers college press, 2016).

¹⁰Demas Brian Wicaksono, I Kadek Yudiana, and Andika Wahyudiono, "Analisis Nilai-Nilai Multikultural Masyarakat Desa Patoman, Blimbingsari, Banyuwangi," *Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah Indonesia* 2, no. 2 (2019): 164–78.

¹¹Dhio Febriansyah Lubis, Ema Serika Ginting, and Maria Dwi Sianipar, "Analisis Implementasi Pendidikan Multikultural Melalui Pendidikan Pancasila Di SMP Negeri 7 Medan," *Jurnal Kemitraan Masyarakat* 2, no. 1 (2025): 83–91.

¹²C Dewi Hartati et al., "RAMADAN AND THE STRENGTHENING OF SOCIAL COHESION: A STUDY OF LOCAL WISDOM IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES," *Indonesian Journal of Studies on Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 2, no. 1 (2025): 53-71.

¹³Arfaton Arfaton et al., "Implementation of Multicultural Education as a Means of Forming Characters of Tolerance and Mutual Respect," *JOURNAL EDUSCIENCE* 12, no. 2 (2025): 377-91.

¹⁴Muhajir Musa, "TEACHER CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN MULTICULTURAL CLASS LEARNING AT MUHAMMADIYAH KUPANG HIGH SCHOOL," *Indonesian Journal of Education (INJOE)* 5, no. 1 (2025): 148-58.

an inclusive classroom environment. This research also strengthens the implementative dimension of multicultural education in the realm of praxis, not just in the form of curricular policies. In other words, this research shows how teachers as agents of change play an active role in shaping a culture of mutual respect and eroding ethnic barriers in schools.

This study aims to explore teachers' strategies in addressing ethnic-based verbal bullying in multicultural schools and evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches in shaping tolerant and inclusive behavior. This study's main contribution is providing a conceptual framework and a model of contextualized teaching strategies for ethnically heterogeneous Indonesian schools. Thus, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for educational policy, teacher training design, and curriculum development sensitive to cultural diversity and identity.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a type of phenomenology.¹⁵ This approach was chosen to explore in depth the subjective experiences of teachers in dealing with ethnic-based verbal bullying in a multicultural school environment. Phenomenological research provides space for researchers to understand the meaning of experiences directly experienced by participants,¹⁶ In this case, teachers are the leading actors in dealing with school social dynamics and identity conflicts.

The research location was at Swabina Karya Junior High School, a junior high school in Indonesia, composed of students with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The site selection was purposive because this school was previously reported to have experienced verbal bullying cases committed by the majority of students against students from ethnic minorities. This school reflects the real situation of Indonesian pluralism, which requires special attention to strengthen multicultural values.

The participants in this study consisted of seven primary informants, namely five subject teachers, one counseling guidance teacher, and one principal. All participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the criteria of having taught for

¹⁵ John.W Creswell, *Qualitative Research & Research Design Choosing Between Five Approaches*, (3rd Edition (Student Library, 2005).

¹⁶ Clark E Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*. (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1994).

at least two years and having experience handling bullying cases or strengthening the value of tolerance in multicultural classes.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observation, and documentation. The interviews were semi-structured to make the data obtained more exploratory, allowing participants to speak freely about their experiences and strategies in dealing with verbal bullying. Observations were conducted in the classroom and school environment to see the direct interaction between students and the approach used by teachers in managing diversity. Documentation collected included lesson plans, bullying case reports, and school policy documents related to diversity and tolerance.

The data analysis process follows Moustakas' phenomenological stages.¹⁷ This stage begins with epoche, the researcher's attempt to abandon personal prejudices during the analysis process. Then horizontalization was conducted to identify essential statements from the interviews that reflected the authentic experiences of the teachers. These statements were then categorized into major themes such as 'mediation strategies', 'integration of values in teaching', and 'challenges in implementing multicultural education'. Textural and structural descriptions were then organized to describe what the teachers experienced and how the school's social context shaped these experiences. Finally, the researcher holistically compiled the essence of the experience as the main conclusion.

Data validity was maintained by using triangulation of techniques and sources, where data from interviews were confirmed by observation and documentation. Member checking involved participants verifying the findings and the researcher's interpretation. In addition, the researcher maintained transparency of the process through reflective recording to control bias and maintain data integrity.

This study was also based on ethical considerations. Participants were given information regarding the purpose, benefits, and their rights during the study. Participants' identities were disguised to maintain confidentiality and comfort during the data collection. Participant consent was obtained in writing before the interview and observation process began.

¹⁷ Moustakas.

Potential and Challenges of Multicultural Education at Swabina Karya Junior High School

This study aims to identify and analyze teachers' strategies in dealing with ethnic-based verbal bullying in a school with a high level of cultural diversity. Findings from the field show that SMP Swasta Swabina Karya Medan is a very pluralistic educational environment in terms of ethnicity and religion. Both educators and students come from diverse backgrounds, which theoretically becomes a great potential in multicultural education. However, this diversity also brings its challenges, especially related to the practice of verbal bullying against students from ethnic minority groups.

Social Reality: Normalizing Ethnic-Based Slurs

In-depth interviews with teachers and students revealed that the practice of teasing ethnic minority students is considered "normal" and is often framed as a joke by majority students. Although not all victims interpreted it as hurtful, some minority students stated that they felt offended, cornered, and even experienced psychological pressure. The issue has sometimes extended to formally involving parents and school authorities. This reinforces Paul Horton's findings that verbal bullying practices that are packaged in the form of humor or jokes are more challenging to recognize and tend to be ignored, even though the impact on the victim's psychology is no less profound.¹⁸

This phenomenon shows ambiguity in students' and teachers' perceptions of verbal actions based on ethnic stereotypes. The interviewed teachers acknowledged that students' responses to banter highly depend on each individual's character. Some teachers even stated that "it's just a joke," but they also realized that the joke could become a serious problem if not handled wisely.

The Teacher's Role as Mediator: Real Strategies in the Field

Seeing this complexity, the role of teachers as social mediators becomes crucial and cannot be ruled out. Teachers are strategically positioned to bridge differences, harmonize shared values, and reduce the potential for ethnic-based conflict through concrete strategies. Based on field data, teachers at Swabina Karya Junior High School have implemented various forms of mediation, such as peer and group mediation, which

¹⁸ Paul Horton, "Reframing School Bullying: The Question of Power and Its Analytical Implications," *Power and Education* 12, no. 2 (2020): 213-20.

involves peers in resolving conflicts as a more equal approach. Second, Restorative justice facilitates meetings between perpetrators and victims in a safe atmosphere to build mutual understanding and agreement. Third, Open dialogue, where teachers create communication forums in the classroom to discuss diversity and build empathy across identities.

This strategy is in line with Gay's concept of *culturally responsive pedagogy*, which emphasizes the importance of building learning interactions that are sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds.¹⁹ Moreover, teachers' mediation approach also shows a close relationship with the *restorative practices* approach, which is widely used in education to repair social relations damaged by conflict.

Transformation of Teacher Roles and Awareness

Field data also showed a transformation in teachers' awareness and skills in dealing with the issue of verbal bullying. Teachers began to show a more proactive attitude in recognizing students' social dynamics, improving communication skills, and developing self-reflection on the importance of creating a discrimination-free learning space.

This shows that multicultural education is not only limited to curriculum policies or subject matter themes, but needs to be implemented in social relations, interaction patterns, and daily practices in the classroom. This also aligns with Nieto's thinking that multicultural education is about building social justice in education, not just about celebrating differences.²⁰

Positive Impact of Mediation on School Climate

After the intervention was carried out by teachers in their capacity as mediators, the study noted a significant decrease in cases of verbal bullying against ethnic minority students. There was also an improvement in the quality of relationships between students, especially between majority and minority students, who began to show mutual respect, accept differences, and develop empathy.

This finding reinforces Halizah's findings, which state that collaborative and multicultural-based intervention strategies can create an inclusive school environment. In

¹⁹ Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (teachers college press, 2018).

²⁰ Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. (ERIC, 1992).

addition, strengthening the role of teachers as social facilitators has also proven to be able to change the dynamics of relations that were previously full of tension into a social space that supports the learning process.²¹

By combining theoretical analysis and field data, this study shows that teachers have a key role in building an inclusive school environment free from ethnic-based bullying. A contextualized and humanist approach to social mediation has proven effective in reducing student tensions and strengthening tolerance values. This research makes an essential contribution to developing multicultural education practices that do not stop in the realm of policy, but live in the spaces of daily interaction in schools.

Conclusion

This research shows that verbal bullying of ethnic minority students at SMP Swasta Swabina Karya Medan is a serious problem that negatively affects the mental, social, and academic well-being of the victimized students. Although some students consider the act a joke, the impact can trigger conflicts and create social gaps among students. Teachers have a strategic role as mediators to address this issue. The strategies used include open dialogue, instilling the value of tolerance, strengthening relationships between students, and intervention programs based on multicultural education. These efforts proved effective in reducing the intensity of verbal bullying and improving harmonious relationships between majority and minority students.

Schools need to hold regular educational programs on the importance of tolerance and cultural diversity, involving students, teachers, and parents. Then, a bullying prevention program based on multicultural education will be implemented. Then, schools must strengthen relationships with parents to support supervision and foster tolerance at home. Then, teachers and school staff need to provide counseling services to help students who are victims of bullying and strengthen their self-confidence. Regular evaluations of the effectiveness of the implemented anti-bullying strategies should be conducted, and adjustments should be made to achieve better results.

²¹ Firdha Halizah et al., "Analysis of the Role of Multicultural-Based Education Management in Reducing Discrimination and Bullying in Primary Schools," *Journal of Basic Education and Social Humanities* 3, no. 9 (2024): 559-68.

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