Transforming Diversity into Character: A Contextual Study of Multicultural Education Practices in Grade IX at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang, Indonesia

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Abstract

Multicultural education has a vital role in instilling the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and inclusive attitudes in students in a diverse society. However, the implementation and concrete impact of multicultural education at the secondary school level, especially in the local context of Indonesia, are still rarely researched in depth. This study aims to examine the implementation of multicultural education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang and analyze its impact on grade IX students' character-building and social attitudes. The approach used is qualitative with an analytical descriptive design. Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and field notes. Informants comprised two principals, six teachers, and ten students purposively selected based on active involvement in the multicultural education program. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation. Analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model with inductive coding techniques to identify the main themes related to multicultural education's implementation, impact, and challenges. The research found three primary strategies in the implementation of multicultural education: (1) integration of diversity values in the learning process and student group dynamics; (2) interfaith religious classes that encourage dialogue and mutual understanding; and (3) use of innovative media such as Bhineka Chatbot as a means of learning diversity. These strategies shape an inclusive learning environment and increase students' social awareness. Multicultural education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang has proven effective in shaping students' humanist character and strengthening their social

attitudes. The findings provide a practical contribution to developing diversity-based character education policies at the secondary school level.
Keywords: Implementation; Multicultural Education; Character.

Introduction

Education is a key foundation in nation building, not only as a tool for knowledge transfer, but also as a medium for holistic social transformation. In Indonesia, the biggest challenge in education is how to accommodate students' diverse cultures, ethnicities, religions and social backgrounds in an inclusive system. According to BPS data, more than 300 ethnic groups live in Indonesia, making the country one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world.[1] However, this diversity often leads to conflict. Setara Institute's 2022 report recorded 180 cases of religious and ethnic-based intolerance in educational settings in the past five years, showing that culturally insensitive education can contribute to social tensions.[2] This emphasizes the importance of integrating multicultural education in the formal education system, especially at the junior high school level.

The concept of multicultural education, as explained by Banks, is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the importance of equality, respect for differences, and active participation in the life of a pluralistic society.[3] This education focuses not only on the cognitive dimension, but also on developing social awareness and cross-cultural empathy.[4] Muhaiminah Akib, emphasizes that effective multicultural education can create a tolerant school climate and prevent horizontal conflicts in pluralistic societies.[5] This approach is in line with Vygotsky's social constructivism theory which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process, especially in plural societies.[6]

Although the urgency of multicultural education has been widely studied, its implementation in junior high schools, especially in areas that have a high diversity background, is still minimally explored in depth. This research departs from the reality at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang, where students come from diverse religious, ethnic and

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[1]Agus Joko Pitoyo and Hari Triwahyudi, "Dinamika Perkembangan Etnis Di Indonesia Dalam Konteks Persatuan Negara," *Populasi* 25, no. 1 (2017): 64–81.

[2]Setara Institute, "Laporan Tahunan Kebebasan Beragama Dan Berkeyakinan," 2022, https://setara-institute.org.

[3]James A. Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education Fifth Edition*, *Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, University of Washington*, 2014.

[4]Francis Ward et al., "ChatGPT for the Intellectual Soul: A Deweyan Perspective on AI-Based Multicultural Classroom Praxis," *Multicultural Education Review* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2025.2467759.

[5]Muhaiminah Akib, Rezkiah Hartanti, and Hermanto Suaib, "Fostering Religious Tolerance in West Papua: A Case Study of Muhammadiyah's Higher-Educational Institutions," *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 28, no. 1 (2020): 49–64, https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.28.1.5978.

[6]L Vygotsky and M Cole, "Learning and Social Constructivism," *Learning Theories for Early Years Practice. UK: SAGE Publications Inc*, 2018, 68–73.

cultural backgrounds. Challenges arise in creating a learning environment that is harmonious, inclusive, and able to encourage empathy and social awareness. Therefore, this research seeks to answer: How does the implementation of multicultural education shape students' social awareness and conflict resolution skills?

Various studies have highlighted the effectiveness of multicultural education. Kartono, examined student tolerance in Batu city and concluded that teacher training plays an important role in success.[7] Cho & Jung explored the integration of AI in multicultural education and concluded that technology can strengthen cross-cultural awareness.[8] Kim & Elliott emphasized the role of digital learning resources in overcoming barriers to multicultural education in South Korea.[9] Miralda-Banda et al. used a collaborative intervention approach to improve cultural literacy and concluded the importance of reflective tasks in strengthening intercultural dialog.[10] On the other hand, Wang et al. examined the impact of multicultural environments on Tibetan students' learning achievement, and confirmed that contextual support is crucial in creating learning effectiveness.[11] However, the majority of these studies focus on conceptual or technological aspects, rather than contextualized field practice in local education units in Indonesia.

This research fills a gap in previous studies by focusing on the concrete practices of multicultural education at the junior high school level in the context of Indonesia's rich diversity. Unlike previous studies that focused on theory, digital interventions or cross-country statistical analysis, this research emphasizes an in-depth qualitative approach through direct observation and interviews. The research site at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang was chosen for its complex socio-cultural characteristics, making it an ideal location to examine the realistic implementation of multicultural education. This is the *novelty* aspect of this research.

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[7] Drajat Tri Kartono et al., "Tolerance of High School Students in an Urban-Transition City: A Study in Batu City," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2445364.

[8] Ward et al., "ChatGPT for the Intellectual Soul: A Deweyan Perspective on AI-Based Multicultural Classroom Praxis."

[9] Rebecca Elliott and Bo La Kim, "Overcoming Barriers: The Potential of AI Digital Textbooks in Multicultural Middle School Education," *Multicultural Education Review* 17, no. 1 (2025): 19–41.

[10] Jose Luna, Garcia-Mila Merce, and Andrea and Miralda-Banda, "A Comparison of Three Types of Tasks during an Intervention on Cultural Literacy and Dialogicity: Insights from Epistemic Network Analysis," *Intercultural Education*, n.d., 1-24, https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2025.2469951.

[11] Yifu Wang et al., "Standard Curriculum Learning Efficacy of Tibetan Students: The Interactive Effect of Multicultural Environment and Self-Related Factors," *International Journal of Educational Research* 131 (2025): 102571, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2025.102571.

The main objective of this study is to explore in depth the implementation of multicultural education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang and how this practice shapes students' social awareness and their ability to respond to differences. This research is expected to make conceptual and practical contributions to the development of a multicultural values-based curriculum, as well as a reference in the formulation of inclusive education policies in Indonesia. Furthermore, the results of this study can also be used as a model to be applied in other schools that have similar diversity complexities, both at the regional and national levels.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with an analytical descriptive design,[12] which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of multicultural education and its impact on character building and students' social attitudes at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore contextually and holistically the various social dynamics in the school environment.

The research subjects included the principal, teachers, and grade IX students directly involved in multicultural education activities. Informants were determined through a purposive sampling technique, with criteria including active involvement in learning activities, interfaith religious programs, and school activities that promote tolerance and diversity values. The total number of informants interviewed in-depth was two principals, six teachers, and 10 students, with data collection taking place until data saturation.

Data was collected through several main techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and field notes. Observations were made of the learning process and students' social interactions inside and outside the classroom, including joint interfaith activities and extracurricular programs related to multicultural education. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis, while documentation included photos of activities, learning videos, and school documents such as lesson plans and annual work programs.

To increase data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was conducted. Data from teacher interviews were compared with field observations and official school

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[12] John W Creswell, "Penelitian Kualitatif & Desain Riset," *Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar*, 2015, 1–634.

documents. This was intended to ensure consistency of findings and avoid subjective bias from only one source.

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification.[13] The researcher conducted an open coding process to identify the main themes that emerged from the data and then categorized them based on the dimensions of implementation, impact, and challenges of multicultural education. The analysis was conducted inductively, with the aim of exploring deep meanings and building interpretations based on field data, not existing theories.

The researcher actively participated as an observer and interviewer during the research process. To maintain objectivity, self-reflection was carried out through daily field notes that recorded the dynamics of interaction and informants' responses to the researchers' presence. This approach helps to ensure that data interpretation remains grounded in the reality in the field, not the researcher's assumptions.

Implementation of Multicultural Education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang

The results show that the implementation of multicultural education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang is not merely ceremonial or symbolic, but has been internalized in the school structure and culture. This approach is reflected through five main strategies: the practice of interfaith prayer, heterogeneous seating arrangements, the formation of inclusive groups, the integration of multicultural values in the curriculum, and teachers' exemplary behavior.

The practice of interfaith prayer is a real representation of spiritual education that respects the diversity of beliefs. This activity provides a reflective space for students to recognize and understand other beliefs without pressure to adopt them.[14] Within the framework of the theory of *religious pluralism* described by Banks, this practice fosters interfaith empathy, and strengthens the foundation of social harmony from school age.[15] Chotimah's research criticizes that many schools only implement religious moderation

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[13] Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Analisis Data Kualitatif*, ed. Tjetjep Rohendi Penerjemah (Jakarta: Penerbit Universitas Indonesia (UI -Press), 1992).

[14] Moh Kalam Mollah and Ifa Nurhayati, "Konsep Pendidikan Multikultural Dalam Pandangan Banks," *FIKROTUNA: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Manajemen Islam* 11, no. 01 (2022): 72–90.

[15] James A. Banks, "Diversity and Citizenship Education in Multicultural Nations∗," *Multicultural Education Review* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/23770031.2009.11102861.

superficially, without touching value awareness.[16] In this context, SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang shows a more substantial approach because it involves spiritual understanding, not just formality.

The strategy of seating arrangement and study group formation is conscious and designed so that students do not only interact with peers who have similar backgrounds.[17] This approach forms a deep social experience through cross-identity collaboration, which proves to be an important element in shaping openness and tolerance.[18] This finding corroborates Allport*'s contact hypothesis* concept as presented by Shelley, which states that direct interaction between individuals from different backgrounds in an equal and cooperative context will reduce prejudice.[19]

Furthermore, the school systematically inserts multicultural values in learning across subjects, such as social studies, Indonesian language, and science. This shows the implementation of the *infusion model* approach as developed by Sleeter & Grant (2011), where pluralism values are embedded in all disciplines, not just in moral or Civics lessons. Teachers are trained to relate teaching materials to students' social contexts so that students not only learn facts, but also understand the reality of living together in a pluralistic society.

Equally important, the role of teachers as role models of multicultural values is a major force in the success of this implementation. Teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang do not only convey moral messages, but also carry them out through daily attitudes that are full of respect for differences. This is in line with the concept of *pedagogical humanism*, where human values become the main foundation of learning.[20] When students directly see teachers' fair, open and respectful attitudes, value learning becomes more authentic and has a long-term impact.

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[16]Chusnul Chotimah, Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy, and Mirna Yusuf, "Superficial Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic Educational Management," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2442235.

[17] Nopri 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).

[18]Merce Garcia-Mila et al., "Change in Classroom Dialogicity to Promote Cultural Literacy across Educational Levels," *Sustainability* 13, no. 11 (2021): 6410.

[19]Shelley McKeown and John Dixon, "The 'Contact Hypothesis': Critical Reflections and Future Directions," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 11, no. 1 (2017): e12295.

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

Multicultural Education and Student Character Building

This research also shows that multicultural education contributes significantly in shaping students' character, especially in the values of tolerance, cooperation, empathy, and respect for differences. This finding strengthens Anida's (2020) research which states that the internalization of multicultural values from an early age has a positive impact on student character, including in shaping social awareness and personal integrity.

The implementation by the school confirms that multicultural education is not only about recognizing cultural diversity but also about developing social, emotional and ethical skills. The cultivation of values such as politeness, justice and respect become an integral part of school life. This strategy is consistent with the policy direction of *Strengthening Character Education* (PPK) in Presidential Regulation No. 87/2017, which emphasizes the integration of religious values, nationalism, integrity and mutual cooperation in formal education.[21]

The Impact of Multicultural Learning on Students' Social Attitudes

The effectiveness of multicultural education is evident in changes in students' social attitudes. Students show improvement in terms of openness to differences, being able to establish social relations across ethnicities, religions and cultures naturally. In class observations and interviews, it was found that students were able to respond to differences with a positive attitude and avoid discriminatory behavior.

As highlighted by Renal Sipangidoan, the complexity of social diversity is not an obstacle to the formation of harmonious social relations, provided that the educational process is able to direct differences into assets, not sources of conflict.[22] This is evident in the behavior of students at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang, where diversity is considered part of everyday life that does not need to be contested, but celebrated.

In this context, multicultural education serves not only as a vehicle for individual character building, but also as a strategy for building social cohesion. Students trained in an inclusive atmosphere have proven to be able to form a safe, supportive and respectful school community.

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[21]Nurotun Mumtahanah, "Integrasi Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Pada Sekolah Negeri (Alternatif Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter Siswa Pasca Berlakunya Peraturan Presiden Nomor 87 Tahun 2017 Tentang Pendidikan Karakter)," *Akademika* 11, no. 02 (2017).
[22]Renal Sipangidoan Siregar and Asniti Karni, "Peran Pendidikan Multikultural Dalam Membangun Toleransi Di Asia Tenggara," *Mauriduna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 181–93.

This research enriches the study of multicultural education by providing an overview of praxis and contextual implementation at the junior high school level in Indonesia. In contrast to previous studies that focus on the conceptualization or policy of multicultural education, this research presents the real dynamics of field practice in the context of social diversity that is unique to Indonesia.

The main contribution of this research is to strengthen the *transformative multicultural education* model by emphasizing the importance of synergy between school structure, curriculum, and teacher work ethic. The findings open space for the development of a pluralism value-based teacher training model that not only teaches concepts, but also practices living together in diversity.

Conclusion

Three main points can be concluded based on the research findings regarding the implementation of multicultural education at SMP Negeri 1 Kotapinang, especially in shaping the character of grade IX students. *First*, multicultural education is implemented through a comprehensive strategy that includes integrating diverse values in the learning process, implementing interfaith religious classes, and utilizing innovative media such as Bhineka Chatbot. These strategies form an inclusive learning ecosystem and foster collective awareness of tolerance and respect for differences.

Second, the approach contributes significantly to the formation of humanist student characters by internalizing values of equality, mutual respect, and empathy across identities. This process is done through social habituation, introduction to local and national cultures, and strengthening the practice of living together in diversity.

Third, the impact of multicultural learning is seen in changes in students' attitudes, which are more open, tolerant, and able to interact positively with people from different backgrounds. Students show better social maturity, reduce the potential for group exclusivism, and form more equal and inclusive relationships.

This research shows that multicultural education is contextually relevant in a diverse school environment and effective in shaping students' characters that are adaptive to multicultural social realities. The findings serve as a basis for developing diversity-based character education policies and practices at the secondary education level.

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