

Fostering Academic Achievement and Social Integration through Multicultural Education: A Qualitative Study in Indonesian Vocational Schools

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education has the potential to foster social harmony while supporting academic achievement in diverse school settings. Despite its relevance, little is known about its implementation and impact in Indonesian vocational high schools (SMK), where students come from varied cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. This qualitative study employed a case study design to examine how multicultural education is practiced in one state vocational school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five informants (teachers, a student, and a vice principal), participant observation, and document analysis. A thematic analysis was applied, and it was supported by methodological and source triangulation to ensure validity. Findings reveal that multicultural education is enacted through curriculum content integration, culture-based extracurricular activities, and inclusive school policies. These strategies cultivate a classroom climate that values diversity, enhances student confidence, and motivates active learning. Moreover, structured cross-cultural interactions reduce prejudice and strengthen social relationships among students. Teachers observed higher participation, particularly from students of minority backgrounds, while administrators reported reduced intergroup conflicts and stronger collaboration across cultural lines. The study concludes that multicultural education plays a dual role in academic and social development. When implemented contextually in vocational schools, it can promote student engagement and foster social cohesion. However, given the study's limited scope and reliance on qualitative perceptions, broader research with mixed-method approaches is recommended to better capture the impact on measurable academic outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. With more than 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of local languages, and multiple religions and belief systems, the country represents a complex mosaic of identities. This richness of diversity, while undoubtedly a national asset, also presents challenges for the education sector, particularly in creating inclusive learning environments that foster both academic development and social cohesion. Schools, as social institutions, carry a dual responsibility: not only to deliver academic content, but also to nurture students' character, encourage tolerance, and strengthen their ability to interact constructively within pluralistic societies (Ikhsan & Giwangsa, 2019; Supriatin & Nasution, 2017).

Amid rapid globalization and the expansion of digital communication, students increasingly face exposure to diverse perspectives, lifestyles, and worldviews. This dynamic context makes multicultural education a highly relevant approach in Indonesia. Multicultural education emphasizes the recognition of diversity and the integration of cultural perspectives into learning, thereby equipping students with intercultural understanding, empathy, and social awareness (Baihaqi, 2021; Beachum, 2020). In line with the national philosophy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), multicultural education seeks to transform diversity into a source of strength, rather than conflict. It has been argued that such an approach not only helps reduce prejudice but also promotes inclusive learning environments where students from different backgrounds feel valued and respected (Ratmaningsih et al., 2018).

The urgency of multicultural education in Indonesia lies in its potential to prevent conflict and build national unity. Anwar and Kulyawan (2022) contend that the systematic implementation of multicultural values can contribute to the development of a nationalist and religiously harmonious society. Beyond promoting tolerance, multicultural education also functions as a vehicle for enhancing students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. When curriculum content is deliberately designed to include cultural diversity, and when teaching methods reflect inclusive practices, schools become more responsive to the realities of social pluralism (Baihaqi, 2021). Thus, schools must not only serve as places of intellectual development, but also act as cultural and civic institutions that prepare students to engage responsibly with both local and global communities.

Research from different contexts demonstrates that well-designed multicultural education can reduce prejudice, strengthen openness, and improve student engagement (Ratmaningsih et al., 2018). Nevertheless, challenges remain in Indonesia, particularly regarding systemic integration and the socio-cultural complexities of a diverse society (Anwar & Kulyawan, 2022). Policies at the national level may promote inclusivity, but practical implementation at the school level often encounters limitations related to resources, teacher training, and community involvement. This situation underscores the importance of empirical research that documents and analyzes how multicultural education is actually practiced within Indonesian schools.

The role of multicultural education becomes particularly significant in vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan or SMK). These institutions are designed to prepare students for employment in various sectors and are characterized by heterogeneous student populations. Students in vocational schools often come from diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, which makes inclusivity and cultural awareness central to the learning process. Multicultural education in vocational schools serves a dual function: first, it creates equitable and supportive learning environments where all students can thrive academically; second, it equips graduates with soft skills—such as empathy, teamwork, and cross-cultural communication—that are essential in today's globalized workforce (Semila et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2023).

Several strategies are employed in the implementation of multicultural education, ranging from curriculum integration to changes in assessment practices. Akcaoğlu and Aرسال (2021) emphasize the importance of content integration, where materials from different cultural traditions are included in lessons. Tamang (2022) highlights the need to reform both teaching methods and evaluation systems to ensure that equality and justice are embedded in the learning process. Additionally, collaboration between schools, families, and communities is vital to ensure the sustainability of multicultural

practices (Beachum, 2020). Beyond improving inclusivity, multicultural education also contributes to human rights awareness and the promotion of values such as equality, justice, and respect for diversity (Putri et al., 2023).

While the potential of multicultural education is widely acknowledged, its implementation in Indonesian vocational schools has not been sufficiently explored. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on general education or primary schools, leaving the vocational context underrepresented (Khair et al., 2024). This gap is problematic because vocational education plays a critical role in shaping Indonesia's workforce, and the success of multicultural initiatives in this setting directly influences students' ability to function effectively in pluralistic workplaces. Furthermore, little empirical evidence exists regarding how multicultural education impacts both academic outcomes and social integration simultaneously in vocational schools. Previous studies have often emphasized either the cognitive benefits (e.g., academic achievement) or the socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., tolerance, empathy), but not the interplay between the two (Gulzar et al., 2024; Johnson, 2022).

Given this background, the present study seeks to explore how multicultural education is implemented in Indonesian vocational schools and to examine its influence on students' academic achievement and social integration. Specifically, it focuses on the lived experiences of teachers and students in fostering inclusive school cultures and the strategies used to embed multicultural values into teaching and extracurricular activities. The study is significant for two main reasons. First, it contributes to the empirical understanding of multicultural practices in vocational settings, an area that remains under-researched in Indonesia. Second, it provides practical insights that can inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in designing policies and interventions that are responsive to student diversity.

Theoretically, this study enriches the broader discourse on multicultural education in Southeast Asia by offering contextual evidence from Indonesia. While global literature on multicultural education highlights common principles such as inclusivity, equality, and justice (Banks & Banks, 1989; Chen, 2024), the unique socio-cultural fabric of Indonesia provides a distinct context in which these principles are negotiated and operationalized. Insights from this research may therefore serve as a reference for both comparative studies and regionally grounded educational reforms.

This article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the qualitative case study methodology employed in the research, including data collection and analysis procedures. The subsequent section presents the main findings and discussion, focusing on the strategies of multicultural implementation and its impact on academic and social outcomes. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the key results, outlining practical implications for education policy and practice, acknowledging the study's limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and practices of multicultural education in a vocational school setting. Case studies provide the flexibility to capture the complexity of social dynamics within a specific educational unit, with a particular focus on the interactions between individuals and cultures in the school environment.

2.2 Research Location and Participants

The research was conducted at a state Vocational High School (SMK) in Indonesia, selected purposively because it serves students from diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds and has formally integrated multicultural approaches into its policies and learning activities.

Participants were also selected purposively to represent varied but complementary perspectives on multicultural implementation. Five informants were involved: two general subject teachers

(Indonesian Language and Pancasila Education), one Guidance and Counseling teacher, one student from a minority cultural background, and one vice principal for student affairs. The inclusion of these roles was considered sufficient to capture different levels of engagement: classroom teaching, student counseling, student lived experience, and school management.

The relatively small number of participants is consistent with the qualitative case study design, where depth of data is prioritized over breadth. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation. After five in-depth interviews, supported by observation and document analysis, the data showed repetition of core themes, suggesting that further participants would not yield substantially new insights.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review.

1. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with each informant, lasting 45–60 minutes, using open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share detailed experiences and narratives.
2. Observations were carried out in both classroom and extracurricular activities to capture authentic interactions among students and between students and teachers.
3. Documents reviewed included school curricula, regulations, activity records, and teacher council meeting minutes. These sources provided contextual evidence and supported triangulation.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical principles of qualitative inquiry. All participants were provided with clear explanations of the study's purpose and procedures and gave informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality was assured by anonymizing names and roles in the final report. The researcher also maintained cultural sensitivity throughout data collection to prevent discomfort or bias in participants' responses.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving open coding, categorization, and identification of key themes. Interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to identify emerging patterns. The analysis process was iterative and conducted alongside data collection, allowing refinement of focus over time. To enhance validity, triangulation was performed across data collection methods (interviews, observations, and documents) and sources (teachers, students, and school management). Member checking was conducted by confirming interpretations of interview findings with informants. The researcher also kept reflexive notes throughout the process to minimize bias and maintain objectivity.

2.6 Limitations in Measuring Academic Achievement

One limitation of this study lies in its measurement of academic achievement. Rather than using quantitative indicators such as examination scores or grade point averages, the study relied on informants' perceptions, classroom observations, and school documentation to assess how multicultural education influences student motivation and participation in learning. These qualitative indicators highlight the experiential and behavioral aspects of learning but cannot be generalized as direct measures of academic performance. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory insights rather than definitive evidence of causal links between multicultural education and academic achievement.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Multicultural Education Strategy

These findings reflect the implementation of multicultural education in the form of content integration and direct experience, as suggested by experts. This strategy not only builds students' cognitive understanding but also encourages emotional and social engagement in the learning process. The concept of content integration involves incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum, so that students can see representations of their own and others' cultures in the learning materials. This approach helps reduce cultural bias and create a more inclusive learning environment (Mollah & Nurhayati, 2022; Todor, 2015). A study of prospective teachers showed that a 10-week multicultural education intervention with a content integration approach significantly improved their multicultural attitudes and efficacy, confirming the effectiveness of this strategy in the context of teacher training (Akcaoğlu & Aرسال, 2021).

In addition to content enrichment, hands-on experiences are also an important component of multicultural education. Activities such as service learning and interracial interactions provide students with real-world opportunities to apply diversity values in everyday social contexts. These activities enhance students' civic awareness and social engagement (Cole & Zhou, 2014). In the context of teacher training, the integration of hands-on experiences in multicultural education emphasizes the importance of contextualizing and culturally-based learning for students (Todor, 2015). Multicultural education also fosters emotional and social engagement by instilling respect for diversity and an understanding of different cultural backgrounds. This approach not only supports students' cognitive development but also strengthens their social identity and prepares them as active citizens in a diverse society (Todor, 2015; Yao et al., 2009).

The school that was the research location actively implemented a multicultural education approach through content integration in the curriculum, culture-based activities, and inclusive school policies. One of the main strategies was to insert local and national cultural materials into daily learning. An Indonesian language teacher stated, *"In the Indonesian language material, I choose texts from various cultures, such as Papuan, Sulawesi, and Sumatran folklore. The goal is for students to know and appreciate our cultural diversity"* (Indonesian Language Teacher, Interview 1, March 15, 2025). In addition, the school routinely holds culture-based extracurricular activities such as the "Nusantara Cultural Festival, which is held every semester. In this activity, students display traditional clothing, dances, and traditional foods from various regions. The Guidance and Counseling Teacher said, *"This activity makes children more open. They get to know their friends' cultures, even those who used to tease each other, now become a dance team together"* (BK Teacher, Interview 2, March 16, 2025). This approach actually creates a school environment that not only educates academically, but also fosters values of tolerance and solidarity among students.

3.2 Impact on Academic Achievement

The results of the interviews showed that an inclusive learning environment has a positive impact on students' learning motivation, especially those from minority groups. A student shared his personal experience, *"I used to be a bit inferior because I was the only one from the eastern region. But after often appearing at school events, I felt appreciated, so I was enthusiastic about joining the lesson"* (Student, Interview 3, March 17, 2025). This experience shows that when schools provide space for students' identities to be recognized and expressed, it can increase their self-confidence and involvement in learning. Several teachers also noted an increase in students' active participation in discussions and group work, especially after the implementation of the cross-class cultural program. *"They are now more courageous to speak up in class, especially children who used to be quiet. I see a correlation with activities that highlight their identities"* (PPKn Teacher, Interview 4, March 15, 2025).

Although academic improvement cannot be directly linked, active engagement in learning is an important indicator of the success of multicultural education. This is in line with the view that inclusive

learning environments can strengthen students' motivation and self-efficacy. Active engagement in learning environments has been shown to positively impact the learning process by enhancing students' motivation and self-efficacy, especially for students from underrepresented groups. The application of active learning techniques and a supportive classroom climate can reduce barriers to participation and create a sense of belonging among students. Strategies such as group discussions, simulations, and hands-on practice have been shown to improve students' understanding, critical thinking skills, and learning motivation (Sarudin et al., 2024). Even in STEM fields, strategies such as flipped classrooms can improve student engagement and performance, especially for those from marginalized groups (Aji & Khan, 2019).

The importance of creating a positive classroom climate has also been emphasized in various studies. Supportive teacher-student relationships and constructive feedback have been shown to increase student motivation (Firman & S, 2024). Pedagogical models such as ECNQ that emphasize engagement and communication have been successful in creating a friendly learning atmosphere and encouraging student participation in engineering education (Marquez & Garcia Jr, 2024). In a more specific context, active learning has increased student motivation and self-efficacy, as shown in a study of a biochemistry course, where students focused more on the learning process than simply pursuing grades (Cicuto & Torres, 2016). Access to diverse learning resources, engaging materials, and well-integrated use of technology also play an important role in increasing student motivation and engagement (Firman & Sandiarsa, 2024). Therefore, multicultural education designed within the framework of active learning and an inclusive environment has great potential in supporting students' achievement and overall personal development.

3.3 Impact on Social Integration

The implementation of multicultural education in this school has proven effective in creating harmonious social relationships between students from diverse backgrounds. The vice principal for student affairs stated that conflicts based on ethnicity or religion almost never happen anymore: "*Now there are rarely conflicts due to differences in ethnicity or religion. They are actually closer because they often work in groups across classes and departments*" (Vice Principal for Student Affairs, Interview 5, March 18, 2025). The results of the researcher's observations support this statement, showing that students actively work together regardless of their region of origin, both in learning and extracurricular activities. In the school's art and social project activities, students from various backgrounds appear enthusiastic about collaborating. One student shared his experience, "*We were once in a group with friends from different religions and regions, and it turned out to be fun. We even learned each other's habits*" (Student, Interview 3, March 17, 2025). This shows that a multicultural approach that is implemented concretely is able to foster an attitude of mutual respect and a sense of togetherness among students.

This finding is in line with Allport's intergroup contact theory, which states that interactions between different social groups in equal and structured conditions can significantly reduce prejudice and increase social cohesion. Intergroup contact theory emphasizes four optimal conditions: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. Well-implemented multicultural education meets these four conditions, thereby creating a social environment that supports the formation of more inclusive relationships between individuals. Equal status prevents power imbalances that can exacerbate differences, while common goals and cooperation in cross-class projects create positive interdependence among students (Cox & Balcetis, n.d.; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In the school context, collaborative activities and common goals such as cultural activities or social projects, are effective means of uniting students from different backgrounds.

Institutional support is also an important aspect that encourages the creation of healthy intergroup interactions. School policies that support diversity, the implementation of inclusive curricula, and joint activity programs demonstrate the active role of institutions in creating a positive multicultural climate (Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In the implementation in this school, cooperation in a non-

competitive atmosphere has been shown to strengthen empathy and reduce social anxiety between groups. Research from Northern Ireland shows that intergroup contact in schools, regardless of their ethno-religious composition, is positively correlated with attitudes towards other groups (Hughes et al., 2013). This is in line with recent studies that prove the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice in various social contexts, including in pluralistic educational environments (Lim et al., 2024). Thus, the implementation of structured multicultural education in vocational schools not only strengthens social relationships between students, but is also an effective intervention in building a more inclusive society from school age.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the positive perception of multicultural education implementation within a single vocational school context, emphasizing its potential role in fostering inclusive educational environments. However, the research is limited in scope due to its focus on a single institution, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study did not include quantitative measurements of students' academic performance, relying instead on perception-based data and internal documentation. To build on these findings, future research should broaden the geographical scope to encompass diverse educational settings and employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data. Further studies are also encouraged to investigate the correlation between multicultural education strategies and student achievement in specific subject areas, such as science and technology, to yield more targeted and measurable insights.

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