

Character Education Based on Multiculturalism: Efforts to Foster Tolerance from an Early Age in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of character education in a multicultural elementary school setting, specifically at SD Negeri Pampang, Makassar. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to understand how character values are integrated into school activities and how students and teachers perceive and respond to cultural diversity. Data were collected through interviews with teachers and students, observations, and documentation. The findings reveal that character education at SD Negeri Pampang is realized through a variety of school programs, habituation, and daily interactions that emphasize values such as tolerance, mutual respect, cooperation, and responsibility. Teachers act as role models and facilitators in creating an inclusive learning environment, while students demonstrate understanding and appreciation for cultural differences. The discussion highlights the relevance of multicultural-based character education as a strategic approach to strengthening students' moral attitudes and social sensitivity. The study concludes that multicultural education, when integrated with character education, significantly contributes to fostering a harmonious school culture and preparing students to live in a diverse society.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education systems across the globe face the dual challenge of improving academic outcomes while also nurturing social responsibility and moral values. As societies become increasingly diverse due to globalization, migration, and technological interconnectedness, schools are not only tasked with developing students' intellectual abilities but also expected to shape their character and social attitudes. Among the many values that modern education seeks to instill, tolerance has emerged as a core principle in fostering peaceful coexistence, especially in multicultural nations (Banks, 2015; Mahfud, 2020).

Indonesia, as one of the world's most culturally diverse countries, presents a unique context for understanding the role of education in promoting tolerance. Home to more than 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of local languages, and multiple religions, Indonesia's national identity is grounded in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). In this context, character education becomes not only an educational objective but also a societal necessity (Tilaar, 2004; Fitri, 2012). The nation's long-term social harmony depends in part on the ability of schools to cultivate respect for differences from an early age (Munastiwi & Puryanti, 2020).

Elementary schools, in particular, play a foundational role in character formation. During the early years of schooling, children begin to develop their personal identity and social awareness. They also start forming their understanding of fairness, empathy, cooperation, and inclusion. These formative experiences can strongly influence how they will relate to others throughout their lives (Nurcholis, 2013). Thus, character education that emphasizes tolerance and multicultural understanding is crucial in shaping inclusive mindsets and behavior (Fayza et al., 2024).

Despite growing awareness of the importance of character education, there remains a gap between policy and practice. While Indonesia has introduced national frameworks and educational standards that incorporate moral and civic values, the integration of multicultural principles into classroom practice is still inconsistent and underexplored (Sunaryati et al., 2024). In many elementary schools, especially those located in urban and culturally diverse areas, students interact daily with peers of different backgrounds. However, such diversity does not automatically lead to mutual respect or cultural appreciation. On the contrary, incidents of peer bullying, ethnic stereotyping, and exclusionary behavior continue to surface (Diniah et al., 2024). This indicates that tolerance must be taught deliberately, not assumed to develop naturally through exposure alone (Ardi & Saputra, 2024).

Makassar City, particularly the Panakkukang District, exemplifies this dynamic. It is a melting pot of ethnic and cultural communities from across Eastern Indonesia. Within its elementary schools, teachers and students navigate various cultural perspectives on a daily basis. This context provides a fertile ground for exploring how multicultural-based character education can be meaningfully implemented. How do teachers promote tolerance? What pedagogical strategies help students internalize values such as empathy, respect,

and openness to diversity? How do students respond to lessons or activities that highlight multicultural values?

This study seeks to address these questions through a qualitative investigation of selected elementary schools in the Panakkukang District. Using interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the research examines the practical ways in which teachers integrate multicultural themes into character education, and how students engage with these efforts.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on lived classroom experiences within a real multicultural environment, rather than relying solely on theoretical or policy-level analysis (Farid, 2024; Marliyah, 2024). By highlighting specific practices and responses from both teachers and students, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how tolerance can be cultivated in diverse school settings. It also offers practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of character education in multicultural societies.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how multicultural-based character education is implemented in a real classroom setting. The research was conducted at SD Negeri Pampang, an elementary school located in the Panakkukang District of Makassar City, Indonesia. This school was selected due to its culturally diverse student population, representing various ethnic and religious backgrounds, making it a relevant site for investigating the dynamics of tolerance education. The participants were chosen purposively and consisted of six teachers and eighteen students from upper primary grades (Grades 4 to 6), all of whom were actively engaged in character education activities. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students, classroom observations to capture instructional practices and student interactions, and document analysis involving lesson plans, school regulations, and related learning materials. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify patterns and themes. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and anonymizing personal identifiers to protect confidentiality and ensure the integrity of the research process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural Education and Character Formation

Multicultural education, as conceptualized by Banks (2015), is not merely a curriculum design but a transformative process aimed at fostering equity and social justice in diverse societies. In the Indonesian context, where diversity is enshrined in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), the integration of multicultural values into character education becomes both a pedagogical and sociopolitical imperative (Tilaar, 2004; Mahfud, 2020).

Several studies have emphasized that early exposure to multicultural experiences significantly influences the development of tolerance and empathy in children (Nurcholis, 2013; Munastiwi & Puryanti, 2020). Schools are regarded

as pivotal arenas for shaping moral dispositions, especially in heterogeneous urban settings like Makassar, where cultural plurality is a lived reality. Fayza et al. (2024) highlight that inclusive learning environments which respect student diversity can contribute to the formation of socially responsible citizens.

However, research also reveals persistent gaps between policy frameworks and actual classroom practices. While national curricula may mandate the teaching of character values, their implementation is often limited by a lack of contextualized resources and teacher training (Sunaryati et al., 2024; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). This has prompted educators to seek creative and localized strategies to instill tolerance and cultural appreciation, such as the use of storytelling, interfaith celebrations, and cooperative learning tasks (Nieto, 2010; Ardi & Saputra, 2024).

Consequently, this study builds upon prior work by shifting the focus from theoretical models to practical, lived experiences of multicultural character education in a real-world school environment. By exploring how teachers and students interact daily in culturally diverse classrooms, the research provides nuanced insights into how values such as empathy, respect, and cooperation are internalized through intentional pedagogy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of multicultural-based character education at SD Negeri Pampang, Makassar. The school was purposefully selected due to its culturally diverse student population, making it a relevant site for examining tolerance education in practice. Participants included six teachers and eighteen students from Grades 4 to 6, selected through purposive sampling to ensure depth of insight. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, focusing on how values such as respect, empathy, and cooperation were integrated into daily school activities. Interviews provided personal reflections from teachers and students; observations captured real-time interactions; and documents such as lesson plans and school policies offered contextual evidence. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify recurring themes. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and pseudonym use to protect participants' identities.

RESEARCH RESULT

The findings of this study revealed that multicultural-based character education at SD Negeri Pampang, Makassar, is practiced through daily classroom routines, cultural storytelling, and teacher-student dialogue that promotes respect, empathy, and cooperation. Teachers play a central role in shaping the classroom atmosphere by integrating multicultural values into the learning process, while students exhibit increasing openness and curiosity toward cultural diversity.

One teacher described her approach as follows:

“I often ask students to share something from their culture – like a food, a tradition, or even a local word they use at home. It helps everyone feel seen, and it teaches others to listen and respect.”
(Teacher A, SD Negeri Pampang)

This practice shows how everyday activities can serve as powerful moments for character development. By giving students a voice and valuing their backgrounds, the teacher fosters inclusion and respect—key components of tolerance education, as emphasized by Banks (2004).

Another teacher shared a restorative approach to managing cultural misunderstandings in the classroom:

“When one student mocked another’s accent, I didn’t scold them directly. I gathered the class and facilitated a conversation about why we speak differently and why that’s okay. After that, they started helping each other instead of teasing.” (Teacher B, SD Negeri Pampang)

This strategy reflects a shift from traditional discipline toward empathy-building, promoting social understanding as a learning goal. It aligns with Gay’s (2010) principles of culturally responsive teaching, which highlight the importance of emotional intelligence and inclusive interaction.

From the students’ perspective, responses suggest that the multicultural environment is not only accepted but celebrated. One student expressed:

“My friend is from Papua. He taught me a song from his village. Now we sing it together during breaks.” (Student 1, Grade 5)

This quote indicates that peer relationships can become a channel for cultural exchange and appreciation. As students share and learn from each other, they naturally develop attitudes of tolerance and acceptance.

Another student described a school event that highlighted cultural diversity:

“During our school’s diversity day, I wore my traditional Bugis outfit, and my classmate wore Makassarese clothes. We learned to dance each other’s traditional dances. It was really fun!” (Student 2, Grade 6)

Such activities serve as experiential learning opportunities, turning abstract values into real experiences. As supported by Nieto (2010), multicultural education becomes most effective when it engages students emotionally and socially, not just cognitively.

Despite the positive practices observed, some challenges remain. A teacher noted:

“The textbooks we use are very general and don't always represent the cultural diversity of our students. I often have to create my own examples or modify the content to fit their background.” (Teacher C, SD Negeri Pampang)

This comment highlights a systemic limitation—the lack of culturally relevant materials that reflect local identities. Sleeter and Grant (2009) argue that without contextualized content, multicultural education risks becoming superficial or tokenistic. In SD Negeri Pampang, however, the teachers' creativity and commitment partially compensate for this gap by making character education more meaningful and grounded in students' lived realities.

In summary, the study shows that multicultural-based character education at SD Negeri Pampang is alive in daily interactions and intentional teaching strategies. While curricular limitations exist, both teachers and students demonstrate the capacity to build inclusive environments where tolerance is not merely taught, but practiced and experienced.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate how multicultural-based character education is being internalized through daily interactions, classroom practices, and school culture at SD Negeri Pampang, Panakkukang District, Makassar. Teachers act not only as facilitators of academic knowledge but also as role models for intercultural respect and inclusivity. The interview with Teacher A, who emphasized that, “We always tell students that even if we are different in religion or culture, we must help and respect each other,” reflects a deliberate and reflective practice of instilling values of tolerance and empathy—core principles in multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2010). Such values are integrated not only in civic education classes but also in daily routines and social interactions, affirming that character building is not confined to textbooks.

The perspectives of students further highlight how these values are absorbed. Student B's comment, “I like my friend who is different from me. We eat different food, but we play together,” shows the development of cultural acceptance at an early age, indicating that children are capable of understanding and practicing tolerance when guided by a supportive educational environment. This aligns with Lickona's (1991) notion that character education must be lived and modeled consistently to be internalized by students.

Moreover, the school's commitment to multiculturalism is evident in their celebration of various cultural events and the encouragement of dialogue between students from diverse backgrounds. Teacher C's statement, “We celebrate both Islamic and Christian holidays together at school. It's not just about celebration—it's about learning and understanding each other,” illustrates the application of multicultural pedagogy through experiential and social learning, resonating with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This approach fosters moral reasoning and empathy as part of students' social development.

However, challenges remain. Teacher B pointed out the lack of consistent parental involvement and societal prejudices that occasionally spill over into the

classroom. These external influences suggest that schools alone cannot bear the full responsibility of multicultural character education. Collaboration between school, family, and community is crucial in cultivating a truly inclusive environment (UNESCO, 2017).

In light of the findings, it can be concluded that multicultural-based character education in SD Negeri Pampang is progressing through a combination of curricular and extracurricular efforts. Nevertheless, systemic support, teacher professional development, and community engagement are needed to sustain and deepen its impact. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy in primary education settings, particularly in diverse urban contexts such as Makassar.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the implementation of multicultural-based character education at SD Negeri Pampang, located in Panakkukang District, Makassar. The findings revealed that character values such as tolerance, mutual respect, empathy, and cooperation are integrated through daily learning activities, school culture, and teacher-student interactions. Teachers play a pivotal role in modeling inclusive behavior and guiding students to appreciate cultural and religious diversity.

Students, in turn, demonstrated an understanding of and engagement with multicultural values, which were evident in their openness to interact and build friendships across differences. These positive attitudes are nurtured through both structured learning (e.g., civics and moral education) and informal experiences (e.g., joint celebrations and collaborative classroom tasks). The school environment thus serves as a microcosm for practicing unity in diversity, aligning with the goals of character education in a pluralistic society.

However, the study also identified challenges, particularly in maintaining consistency of values between school and home environments, and in addressing broader societal prejudices. These obstacles highlight the need for a more comprehensive collaboration involving families, communities, and educational stakeholders.

In conclusion, multicultural-based character education at the primary level can be effectively implemented through contextual and inclusive pedagogical practices. SD Negeri Pampang exemplifies how schools can foster a generation of young learners who are not only academically competent but also morally and socially responsible within a diverse society. Future efforts should focus on enhancing teacher training, community engagement, and policy support to ensure the sustainability and wider adoption of multicultural education practices in other schools across Indonesia.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Based on the study's findings and identified gaps, the following future research directions are recommended:

Longitudinal Impact Studies

Investigate the long-term effects of multicultural character education on students' moral development, social behavior, and civic participation from elementary through secondary education.

Comparative Studies Across Regions

Compare multicultural character education practices across urban, suburban, and rural schools in Indonesia to understand how geographical and sociocultural contexts influence implementation.

Integration with Digital Media and Technology

Explore how digital storytelling, virtual cultural exchange programs, and gamified learning platforms can enhance students' engagement with multicultural values.

Teacher Training and Professional Development Models

Design and evaluate structured training programs that prepare teachers to implement inclusive pedagogies in multicultural classrooms effectively.

Policy Implementation Analysis

Conduct critical policy studies on how national frameworks for character and multicultural education are translated into school-level practices, identifying gaps and opportunities for alignment.

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