



Foundations of Multicultural Education: Education in a Multiethnic and Multireligious Society

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Abstract

Multicultural education is a response to the increasing diversity within school populations and the growing demand for equal rights and opportunities for all groups in society. It is an educational approach that embraces all students without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social status, or religion. This study aims to examine the concept of multicultural education and explore its role in fostering education within multiethnic and multireligious societies. The research employs a literature review method by analyzing various sources, including books, academic journals, and scholarly articles related to multicultural education. The findings indicate that multicultural education plays a significant role in strengthening national identity in Indonesia and addressing the challenges of social and national disintegration arising from differences in ethnicity, race, culture, religion, and other forms of diversity. Furthermore, multicultural education contributes to the development of a respected, progressive, and globally recognized nation by promoting appreciation for diversity, supporting minority groups, advocating for social justice, and fostering cultural awareness. Ultimately, it helps shape individuals with strong cultural values and contributes to the creation of a harmonious and culturally enriched society.

Keywords: Education; Multicultural Education; Curriculum; Multiethnic Society; Multireligious Society.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's pluralistic society, characterized by its diversity in ethnicity, race, religion, culture, and social status, has significantly contributed to the development and dynamics of national life. Indonesia is recognized as one of the largest multicultural countries in the world, as reflected in its vast geographical landscape and rich socio-cultural and religious diversity. In this context, multicultural education plays a crucial role in fostering social harmony and mutual understanding among different groups. Multicultural-oriented education, particularly Islamic education, emphasizes a dialogical approach that promotes peaceful coexistence amidst diversity and differences. This educational approach is grounded in the principles of equality and human dignity, regardless of ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds, thereby creating a harmonious and conducive social environment. Historically, the importance of multicultural education can be traced to the civil rights movements, where educators and scholars collaborated to establish a foundation for multicultural educational leadership and the promotion of social justice.

The significance of multicultural education in strengthening national identity in Indonesia cannot be overstated. In addressing the potential threats of social, national, and political disintegration, it is essential to recognize, preserve, and protect the nation's diversity. Ethnic, cultural, religious, and social

differences, if not managed properly, may become sources of conflict that threaten national unity and sovereignty. Therefore, attitudes of ethnocentrism and group egoism must be minimized at local, regional, and national levels. Multicultural education serves as a strategic instrument for nurturing mutual respect, tolerance, and solidarity among citizens, thereby supporting the maintenance of national cohesion and social stability (Saleh & Murtafiah, 2022).

Cultural diversity within society can enrich the nation's cultural heritage and serve as valuable social capital for building a multicultural Indonesia. However, such diversity also carries the potential to generate social fragmentation, conflict, and jealousy if not accompanied by attitudes of openness, acceptance, and fairness. Consequently, embracing diversity requires individuals and communities to cultivate respect for differences and to promote inclusive social interactions. Multicultural education offers an effective solution to the challenges posed by diversity by fostering tolerance, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence within schools and communities. It contributes to national integration through democratic values and emphasizes the recognition of pluralism across ethnic, cultural, religious, racial, gender, and social-class differences without discrimination (Fajri et al., 2024).

Through multicultural education, students develop an understanding that diversity in culture, religion, language, and ethnicity constitutes a social reality that must be respected

and appreciated. According to Gay, multicultural-based learning enhances students' awareness of the importance of valuing differences and embracing diversity. In Indonesia, this principle is embodied in the national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity)*, which reflects the nation's commitment to pluralism and social harmony. The primary objective of multicultural education in Indonesia is to maintain social cohesion within a multiethnic and multireligious society. Therefore, multicultural education plays a strategic role in shaping students' social behavior, promoting tolerance, and strengthening national integration (Saputra & Parisu, 2025).

The development of multicultural education must be supported through an appropriate curriculum, as the curriculum serves as one of the most important instruments for achieving educational goals. Without a relevant and well-designed curriculum, it is difficult to realize the objectives and aspirations of education effectively (Elisa, 2018). A multicultural curriculum should integrate values of diversity, equality, inclusiveness, and social justice into the learning process. Furthermore, within the context of increasingly complex social relations, multiculturalism serves as a fundamental framework for understanding the realities of human life. Human reality is socially constructed; therefore, there is no single reality but rather multiple realities shaped by diverse cultural, social, and

historical experiences. Consequently, multicultural education becomes essential in preparing learners to live responsibly and harmoniously in a pluralistic society (Munadlir, 2016).

METHOD

This study employed a **library research** method with a **qualitative descriptive approach**. The library research method was conducted by collecting, reading, analyzing, and reviewing various written sources related to the foundations of multicultural education, multicultural curricula, education in multireligious societies, and education in multiethnic societies. The data sources consisted of books, scholarly journals, and academic articles relevant to the topic under investigation.

The qualitative descriptive approach was used to systematically and comprehensively describe the concepts of multicultural education based on the perspectives of experts and findings from previous studies. Data analysis was carried out through several stages, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. These procedures enabled the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the significance of multicultural education in promoting social harmony and cohesion within diverse societies characterized by cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Foundations and Objectives of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is an educational process designed to develop the full potential of learners while recognizing, respecting, and valuing the diversity that exists within society. This diversity encompasses culture, ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender, social status, age, and various other backgrounds. As an educational approach, multicultural education is implemented across different subjects by utilizing students' diverse experiences and identities as valuable learning resources. Through this approach, the learning process becomes more meaningful, inclusive, and effective, while simultaneously fostering democratic values, humanity, tolerance, and mutual respect among students. It encourages learners to accept and appreciate differences both within educational settings and in broader social life (Afif, 2012).

In a broader sense, multicultural education can be understood as a conscious and systematic effort to assist learners in developing their intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual capacities. It seeks to cultivate self-control, positive character traits, ethical behavior, and practical skills that contribute to individual growth as well as the welfare of society, the nation, and the state. The concept of multiculturalism itself refers to the existence of diverse social and cultural backgrounds within a society, including differences in religion, ethnicity, race, geographical origin, and socioeconomic status. Consequently,

multicultural education emphasizes the accommodation and appreciation of these differences in both educational processes and social interactions (Firtikasari & Andiana, 2024).

According to Shaw, multicultural education is a form of education designed to address racial disparities and reduce social inequalities among various groups within society. It aims to cultivate positive social attitudes by promoting learning experiences that respect diversity and encourage interaction among individuals from different backgrounds. Through multicultural education, students are encouraged to collaborate and communicate without discrimination based on culture, race, physical condition, gender, or social status, thereby creating an environment characterized by mutual respect and understanding (Latifah et al., 2021).

Similarly, Gay argues that multicultural education extends beyond teaching about different cultures; it also involves creating an inclusive learning environment for all students, particularly those from minority and underrepresented groups. From this perspective, multicultural education emphasizes recognition, respect, and empowerment of diversity. Several fundamental principles characterize multicultural education. First, it promotes the recognition of diversity by accommodating various cultural backgrounds within educational systems. Second, it advocates educational equity by ensuring equal educational opportunities for all individuals without discrimination. Third, it encourages the integration of diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum, allowing students to learn from multiple viewpoints

rather than a single dominant perspective. Finally, it supports inclusive learning practices that foster positive social interactions among students from diverse backgrounds (Adnyana et al., 2025).

The concept of multicultural education is often described as “education for and about cultural diversity” in response to demographic and cultural changes occurring within communities and across the world. Its primary objective is to establish an educational system that provides equal opportunities for all learners regardless of their backgrounds. Multicultural education seeks to ensure that no individual or social group is marginalized, thereby promoting unity and social cohesion. Through this educational approach, students learn to appreciate diversity, perceive differences as unique and valuable, and develop open-minded perspectives. Achieving these outcomes requires transformations in attitudes, behaviors, and values, particularly within school environments. By interacting and communicating with peers from different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, students gain new insights and experiences that enrich their understanding of the world and strengthen their ability to live harmoniously within diverse communities (Permana & Ahyani, 2020).

Multicultural education is founded on the belief that every culture and civilization possesses equal value and therefore deserves respect, fair treatment, and recognition according to its context. To realize this principle, effective communication and constructive dialogue are essential. Open dialogue promotes shared

understanding, strengthens feelings of solidarity among citizens, and contributes to the development of harmonious social relations. Furthermore, multicultural education recognizes that the dominance of one culture over another may foster feelings of superiority, excessive fanaticism, and narrow forms of nationalism. Therefore, continuous and constructive intercultural dialogue is necessary to maintain balance, preserve cultural diversity, and uphold noble civilizational values. Through such efforts, cultures can be preserved and developed in ways that positively contribute to societal progress. Ultimately, multicultural education aspires to create a harmonious, just, prosperous, and inclusive society where individuals from different backgrounds coexist peacefully (Saptadi et al., 2023).

Another important objective of multicultural education is to contribute to the development of a progressive, dignified, and internationally respected nation. This goal can be achieved by cultivating human resources who are capable of utilizing knowledge and skills to improve both personal well-being and the welfare of society. Educated individuals are expected not only to possess intellectual competence but also to uphold moral and religious values in their daily lives. They use their abilities to benefit others rather than to dominate, discriminate against, or harm different groups. In this context, diversity is viewed as a collective asset that must be appreciated, protected, and utilized to strengthen social unity and national development (Norvaizi et al., 2024).

Multiculturalism also supports diversity by advocating for the interests and rights of various

groups, including minority communities, across multiple social dimensions such as ethnicity, race, religion, culture, politics, and gender. In its ideal form, multiculturalism encourages the establishment of a *politics of recognition*, whereby the identities and contributions of diverse cultural groups are acknowledged and respected within the framework of a nation-state. One of the most influential figures in the development of multicultural education is James Banks, who is widely recognized as a pioneer in this field. His work has significantly contributed to the conceptualization and implementation of multicultural education worldwide (Abdiyah, 2021).

Ultimately, multicultural education seeks to cultivate culturally aware individuals and to foster a culturally enriched society. It promotes essential values such as humanity, nationalism, social justice, and respect for the traditions and identities of various ethnic groups. Moreover, it encourages the development of democratic attitudes that embrace cultural differences and diversity as integral components of social life. Such appreciation is reflected not only in ways of thinking but also in attitudes and actions that demonstrate respect, acceptance, and understanding toward others. Through these values and practices, multicultural education contributes to the creation of harmonious relationships among individuals and communities, thereby strengthening social integration and promoting peaceful coexistence in increasingly diverse societies.

Multicultural Education Curriculum

The curriculum is a fundamental component of education that serves as a guideline for the implementation of educational activities and determines the direction and objectives of the learning process. The success of an educational system is largely influenced by the quality and relevance of the curriculum being implemented. Therefore, the curriculum can be regarded as a crucial element in ensuring that educational activities are conducted effectively and efficiently. As society continues to evolve and social conditions change, curricula must also be adapted to remain relevant to contemporary needs. Given Indonesia's diverse society, characterized by differences in culture, ethnicity, religion, language, and social background, curriculum development must incorporate multicultural values. This approach is known as a multicultural curriculum, which recognizes, respects, and accommodates diversity within the educational process. To ensure its effectiveness, the development of a multicultural curriculum should be grounded in strong philosophical and psychological foundations that reflect the characteristics of a pluralistic society (Susilawati et al., 2024).

The philosophical foundation of curriculum development is closely related to understanding the nature of philosophy and its application in education. A comprehensive understanding of philosophy is necessary because it provides the fundamental principles that guide curriculum design and implementation. According to Kneller, philosophy is the systematic and comprehensive process of thinking about the most general aspects

of reality and existence. Philosophical inquiry emerges from humanity's natural curiosity about the world and serves as a means of seeking deeper understanding and meaning. In the context of education, philosophical perspectives shape educational goals, values, and approaches, thereby influencing the structure and content of the curriculum (Wara, 2007).

Philosophical thought plays a significant role in curriculum development. Every curriculum is influenced by particular philosophical traditions that determine its direction, concepts, and practical implementation. In contemporary educational practice, curriculum development often adopts an eclectic approach, integrating multiple philosophical perspectives to accommodate diverse educational needs and societal expectations. Such an approach enables curriculum developers to create educational programs that are responsive to cultural diversity, social changes, and the demands of modern society.

The relationship between philosophy and education is inseparable because philosophy addresses fundamental questions concerning human life, including educational issues. This relationship has given rise to the field of educational philosophy, which explores the aims, methods, and values of education. Philosophy provides direction and guidance for educational practice, while educational experiences contribute to the development of philosophical thought. As a result, philosophical foundations constitute an essential basis for curriculum development, ensuring that educational programs

are aligned with broader human, social, and cultural values (Faizi et al., 2023).

In addition to philosophical foundations, curriculum development requires a strong psychological foundation. Curriculum planning cannot be conducted arbitrarily without clear theoretical support, as the absence of a solid foundation may hinder the achievement of educational objectives. Psychology, as the scientific study of human behavior, plays a vital role in understanding learners and their developmental needs. Since the curriculum serves as a framework for achieving educational goals, curriculum developers must consider learners' characteristics, abilities, interests, and developmental stages during both the design and implementation processes. Such considerations help ensure that educational objectives are achieved effectively and optimally (Kholik, 2019).

Two major branches of psychology are particularly relevant to curriculum development: developmental psychology and learning psychology. Developmental psychology focuses on human growth and behavioral changes across different stages of life. It examines the nature of human development, developmental stages, developmental tasks, and the various aspects of individual growth. Insights from developmental psychology provide valuable guidance for designing curricula that are appropriate for learners' age levels and developmental capacities. By aligning educational content and learning experiences with students' developmental characteristics, educators can facilitate more meaningful and effective learning outcomes.

Learning psychology, on the other hand, examines how individuals learn and the factors that influence learning behavior. It explores the nature of learning, various learning theories, and the cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors that affect students' educational experiences. Findings from learning psychology contribute significantly to curriculum development by helping educators select appropriate teaching methods, learning activities, and assessment strategies that correspond to students' needs and learning styles. Consequently, the integration of psychological principles into curriculum design enhances the effectiveness of the educational process and supports student achievement (Bahri, 2017).

According to Hamid Hasan, curriculum development can be understood through four interrelated dimensions. The first dimension is the curriculum as an idea, which refers to the philosophical and theoretical foundations underlying curriculum development. This dimension reflects whether the curriculum is designed to address societal needs related to scientific advancement, technological development, religious values, socio-cultural issues, economic challenges, and national development. The second dimension is the curriculum as a document, which includes essential components such as educational objectives, content, learning processes, and assessment systems. The third dimension is the curriculum as a process, which represents the implementation of the plans and guidelines outlined in the curriculum document. The fourth

dimension is the curriculum as an outcome, which refers to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies acquired by learners as a result of participating in educational programs. These four dimensions are interconnected and collectively contribute to the successful development and implementation of a multicultural curriculum that promotes inclusiveness, equality, and respect for diversity within educational settings (Sangadji, 2016).

Education in Multireligious and Multiethnic Societies

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most diverse countries in the world. This diversity is reflected not only in its ethnic groups, cultures, languages, and traditions but also in its religious composition. The officially recognized religions in Indonesia include Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Such diversity constitutes a valuable national asset that enriches the country's social and cultural life. However, if not properly managed, religious diversity can also become a source of misunderstanding, intolerance, and social conflict. Therefore, education plays a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among individuals from different religious backgrounds.

In a multireligious society, education serves as an important instrument for promoting social harmony and peaceful coexistence. Educational institutions are expected to develop students' awareness that religious differences are a natural reality within society and should be viewed as a source of strength

rather than division. Through educational processes that emphasize tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect, learners can develop positive attitudes toward people of different faiths. Such educational efforts are essential for maintaining social stability and preventing conflicts arising from religious differences.

One of the central values emphasized in religious moderation is tolerance. Tolerance refers to the willingness to respect, appreciate, and accept differences without compromising one's own beliefs. In contemporary society, tolerance functions as an effective means of preventing intolerance, extremism, and radicalism. By cultivating tolerant attitudes, educational institutions contribute to the creation of a peaceful and harmonious social environment in which individuals can coexist despite differences in religious beliefs and practices. Consequently, tolerance has become an indispensable component of education in pluralistic societies.

Human beings are inherently social creatures who depend on one another for support, cooperation, and mutual assistance. This interdependence extends beyond ethnic and cultural boundaries and includes relationships among people of different religions. In everyday life, individuals from diverse religious communities often interact, collaborate, and contribute to shared social goals. Examples of harmonious relationships between Muslim and Christian communities in various regions of Indonesia demonstrate that religious diversity does not necessarily lead to conflict. Instead, when accompanied by mutual respect and

understanding, diversity can strengthen social cohesion and community solidarity (Adhima & Farih, 2025).

Within the educational context, schools function as miniature representations of society where students encounter diversity on a daily basis. As a result, schools provide valuable opportunities for students to learn about coexistence, cooperation, and respect for differences. Educational programs that promote intercultural and interreligious understanding help students develop empathy and broaden their perspectives. Through classroom interactions, collaborative projects, and extracurricular activities, learners gain practical experiences in building relationships with peers from different religious backgrounds.

Islamic Religious Education plays a significant role in promoting tolerance within Indonesia's multireligious educational environment. Islamic education is not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge but also seeks to cultivate moral values that encourage peaceful coexistence and respect for others. In schools where students come from various religious backgrounds, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and other faiths, diversity itself becomes a valuable learning resource. Students learn to appreciate differences through direct interaction with peers whose beliefs and practices may differ from their own (Anggraini et al., 2026).

The implementation of collaborative learning activities further strengthens the development of tolerance among students. Group discussions, cooperative assignments, and classroom projects often require students from diverse religious

backgrounds to work together toward common objectives. Through such interactions, students learn that differences in faith do not prevent cooperation, friendship, or mutual respect. These experiences contribute to the formation of inclusive attitudes and help eliminate prejudices that may otherwise emerge from limited social exposure.

Christian education also contributes significantly to the development of harmonious multireligious societies. Rooted in biblical teachings and the traditions of the early Church, Christian education aims to cultivate moral and spiritual values based on love, compassion, justice, and service. These values align closely with the principles of religious moderation and provide a strong ethical foundation for fostering tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In societies characterized by religious diversity, Christian education encourages believers to engage positively with people of other faiths while maintaining their own religious identity.

One of the central teachings of Christianity is Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." This principle serves as a theological foundation for promoting respect, empathy, and understanding toward individuals from different religious traditions. Historically, Christian education has not only focused on strengthening faith but has also emphasized the development of ethical and social values necessary for living in pluralistic societies. Therefore, Christian education plays a strategic role in fostering religious moderation and building communities characterized by mutual respect and peaceful

interaction (Zalukhu, 2025).

In addition to religious diversity, Indonesia is also distinguished by its remarkable ethnic diversity. The country is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, each possessing unique languages, customs, traditions, and cultural identities. This ethnic diversity is an inherent feature of Indonesian society and represents one of the nation's greatest strengths. Nevertheless, differences in ethnic identity can sometimes give rise to stereotypes, discrimination, and social tensions. Consequently, educational approaches that acknowledge and appreciate ethnic diversity are essential for strengthening national unity and social integration.

Multiethnic education refers to an educational approach that recognizes, accepts, and values both the differences and similarities that exist among individuals regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status. This approach emphasizes the importance of treating all individuals with dignity and respect while acknowledging their unique cultural identities. Rather than viewing diversity as an obstacle, multiethnic education considers it a valuable resource that enriches learning experiences and promotes mutual understanding among students from various backgrounds (Mujib et al., 2015).

The implementation of multiethnic education encourages students to understand and appreciate the cultural traditions of different ethnic groups. By learning about diverse cultural practices, values, and perspectives, students develop greater cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Furthermore, multiethnic education promotes democratic values, equality, social justice, and

inclusiveness. These values help students become responsible citizens capable of contributing positively to increasingly diverse societies. Educational institutions that embrace multiethnic principles create learning environments where diversity is celebrated rather than feared.

An example of the importance of multiethnic education can be found in the study of indigenous communities such as the Yali ethnic group. The Yali people possess distinctive cultural values, educational traditions, and social practices that reflect their unique worldview. Examining the cultural characteristics and educational patterns of ethnic communities such as the Yali helps students understand the richness of Indonesia's cultural heritage. More broadly, such learning experiences foster respect for cultural diversity and strengthen awareness that every ethnic group contributes valuable perspectives and traditions to the nation's collective identity. Ultimately, education in both multireligious and multiethnic societies aims to cultivate tolerance, mutual respect, social harmony, and national unity while preserving the diversity that constitutes one of Indonesia's most valuable assets.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education serves as a fundamental foundation for building a harmonious society amid cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial diversity. It functions not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a medium for developing democratic, humanistic, tolerant, and inclusive character traits that promote respect for differences.

Through the implementation of a multicultural curriculum, students are provided with opportunities to understand and internalize the values of diversity, equality, and social justice, thereby creating an inclusive and conducive learning environment. In a multireligious and multiethnic society such as Indonesia, multicultural education has proven effective in strengthening religious moderation, fostering interfaith tolerance, and encouraging appreciation for diverse cultural and ethnic identities, including local cultural characteristics such as the educational traditions and cultural values of the Yali ethnic group.

One of the major strengths of multicultural education lies in its ability to promote unity in diversity, reduce social discrimination, strengthen intergroup interactions, and instill universal humanitarian values. Furthermore, it serves as an effective approach to addressing social conflicts, intolerance, and narrow-minded fanaticism that may threaten national unity. However, multicultural education also faces several challenges and limitations. These include the uneven understanding of multicultural education among teachers and educational institutions, the limited availability of curricula that genuinely reflect diversity, and the persistence of stereotypes and prejudices within society. Additional challenges arise from globalization and technological advancements, which may influence local cultural values if not managed wisely and critically.

Therefore, the future development of multicultural education should be pursued

through a more comprehensive approach. This includes strengthening diversity-based curricula, enhancing educators' competencies, developing inclusive teaching and learning methods, and utilizing educational technology to broaden students' multicultural perspectives. In addition, effective collaboration among schools, families, communities, and government institutions is essential to ensure that the values of tolerance, unity, and respect for diversity are implemented in everyday life. Through continuous improvement and sustained commitment, multicultural education is expected to produce future generations who are not only academically competent but also possess strong social and cultural awareness, enabling them to contribute to the preservation of unity and harmony within Indonesia's diverse and pluralistic society.

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