



IMPROVING INCLUSIVITY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THROUGH STRUCTURED MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION MODELS AND COMPREHENSIVE TEACHER TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenon/Issue: As global societies become increasingly diverse, elementary education faces the challenge of fostering inclusivity and cultural understanding among young students. This study explores the effectiveness of implementing structured multicultural education models and the role of teacher training in enhancing these educational practices.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to assess how multicultural education impacts students' social attitudes and reduces biases in elementary schools, and to examine how teacher preparedness contributes to the success of these programs.

Novelty: This study contributes novel insights by highlighting the dual importance of structured curriculum and comprehensive teacher training in successfully embedding multicultural education at the elementary level. Unlike previous studies, this research emphasizes the combined impact of curriculum design and teacher readiness on fostering inclusive social behaviors.

Research Methods: Using a qualitative approach, this study gathered data from classroom observations, in-depth teacher interviews, and document analysis across diverse elementary school settings.

Results: Findings reveal that multicultural education models positively impact students' social attitudes, enhancing empathy and tolerance. Furthermore, well-trained teachers are better equipped to deliver multicultural education, significantly amplifying its benefits.

Research Contributions: This research underscores the importance of integrated teacher training and multicultural curricula, providing a framework for future policies aimed at creating inclusive educational environments. The study calls for broader implementation of these practices and further research on long-term impacts across educational levels.

INTRODUCTION

Pluralism and multiculturalism have become significant issues across various aspects of modern society, particularly within educational environments. Multicultural education refers to an educational approach that aims to accommodate cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity within the education system, creating an inclusive and tolerant environment for all students. In Indonesia, a country rich in ethnic,

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cultural, and religious diversity, multicultural education is expected to bridge differences, strengthen social cohesion, and cultivate open-minded students. Primary education represents a crucial phase for developing students' character and personality, making the implementation of multiculturalism and pluralism models at the elementary school level essential to achieving these objectives.

The Relevance of Multicultural Education in Indonesia's Diversity Context

Indonesia is recognized for its cultural diversity, encompassing more than 300 ethnic groups and a variety of religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs. This diversity often serves as a source of social richness but can also lead to social tensions if not managed well, especially in educational settings. Multicultural education emerges as one of the effective approaches to foster tolerance, empathy, and appreciation for cultural differences. By introducing multicultural education in elementary schools, students are expected to develop an understanding and respect for differences from an early age, fostering a conducive environment for coexistence amidst diversity.

The Importance of Implementing Multicultural Education Models in Elementary Schools

Elementary school is a crucial phase for children's character development and social understanding. At this age, children begin to shape their self-concept and views toward others based on social interactions at school. Implementing multicultural education in elementary schools establishes an essential foundation for children to understand values of unity, fairness, and respect for others who may have different backgrounds. Multicultural education models can also teach students about human rights and social justice, thus preparing them to become active, tolerant, and open-minded citizens.

Multicultural education in elementary schools can be implemented through various models, such as curricula that integrate multicultural content, thematic learning that involves local cultures, and activities encouraging positive interactions among students from diverse backgrounds. These models can be effective tools to overcome stereotypes and prejudices that may develop early on, creating a generation that is more inclusive and open.

Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

While the importance of multicultural education is widely recognized, its implementation at the elementary school level faces various challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the limited understanding and skills among teachers in teaching multicultural values. Often, teachers lack adequate training to understand and integrate multicultural materials into the learning process. As a result, multicultural education becomes difficult to implement effectively.

Moreover, structural constraints within the curriculum still do not fully support multicultural integration. Some existing curricula focus on homogeneous approaches, lacking sensitivity toward cultural diversity and often positioning the majority culture as the standard. This can lead to a sense of marginalization among students from minority cultural backgrounds, which ultimately affects their participation in learning and social processes at school.

Urgency of Research and Contribution to the Literature

In recent decades, studies on multicultural education have progressed significantly in Western countries, yet in Indonesia, research focusing on implementing multicultural education models in elementary schools remains relatively limited. This study is expected to make an important contribution by exploring multicultural education models that can be effectively implemented in the context of Indonesian elementary schools. By identifying strategies and approaches best suited to address challenges and leverage opportunities within Indonesia's multicultural context, this research aims to

provide practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers to develop an educational system that is more inclusive and supportive of diversity.

Through this research, it is hoped that an educational model fitting Indonesia's social and cultural context will be identified, offering guidance for elementary schools in implementing this approach. This research also aims to assess the impact of multicultural education models on students' attitude and behavior development, thus helping to improve the effectiveness of multicultural education in Indonesia's elementary schools.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze multiculturalism and pluralism education models that can be implemented in elementary schools. This research also seeks to examine the challenges faced by teachers and schools in applying multicultural education and explore the impact of such models on students' attitudes, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study are expected to provide a basis for developing a more inclusive and multicultural curriculum in Indonesian elementary schools and to foster a learning environment that values diversity and cultivates attitudes of tolerance from an early age.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The academic focus on multicultural and pluralism education has expanded significantly due to increasing cultural diversity in classrooms, particularly in elementary schools. Multicultural education emphasizes inclusivity, tolerance, and respect, aiming to create educational environments that foster understanding across diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. This section critically examines existing research on the foundational themes in multicultural and pluralism education within elementary schools and identifies key gaps. It further presents hypotheses on the outcomes and challenges associated with implementing multicultural education in Indonesian primary schools.

Significance of Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

Multicultural education in elementary schools is essential for preparing young students to live in a diverse society by fostering inclusivity and empathy. Banks and colleagues argue that multicultural education should help students not only recognize their cultural identities but also appreciate the identities of others, thereby fostering harmonious intergroup relationships (Banks, 2001). Additionally, recent studies indicate that culturally responsive teaching positively affects students' social and academic development, as it aligns learning with students' lived experiences, which increases engagement and comprehension (Min & Orosco, 2024; Young & Young, 2023).

In diverse classrooms, a multicultural approach is essential to developing students' cognitive and social skills by introducing them to different perspectives. Saribas et al., (2023) highlight that understanding cultural diversity equips students to function effectively in socially and culturally complex environments, which is particularly relevant in Indonesia's multicultural setting (Saribas et al., 2023). Studies also emphasize that early exposure to multicultural values supports the development of inclusive attitudes, reducing prejudice and fostering open-mindedness from an early age (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018).

Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Education

Despite its acknowledged importance, implementing multicultural education faces substantial barriers. One significant challenge is the limited training for teachers on integrating multicultural values into their teaching practices. Teachers often lack the resources or skills to navigate diverse classrooms effectively, which can hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment (Efendi & Lien, 2021; Wahyono et al., 2022). This gap in teacher preparedness is notable in studies highlighting how cultural

biases can inadvertently be reinforced if multicultural education is not carefully managed (Eden et al., 2024).

Furthermore, structural constraints within existing curricula present additional challenges. Multicultural education is often marginalized, and existing curricula sometimes prioritize dominant cultural narratives, leaving little room for minority perspectives. This situation can cause students from minority backgrounds to feel excluded and undervalued, Budiana and colleagues argue that while teachers generally support multiculturalism, there is a lack of systematic approaches to implementing these values within classroom settings, thereby limiting the effectiveness of multicultural initiatives (Lasiyo, n.d.)

Hypotheses Development

Hypothesis 1: Implementing a structured multicultural education model in elementary schools positively influences students' social attitudes and decreases biases. Studies suggest that incorporating multicultural values into the curriculum can help young students develop empathy and tolerance toward diverse groups, fostering a more inclusive school environment (Ruales et al., 2021; Smits & Janssenswillen, 2020).

Hypothesis 2: Teacher training in multicultural practices enhances the efficacy of multicultural education in elementary schools. Existing research shows that teachers with a strong understanding of multicultural principles are better equipped to facilitate inclusive classroom environments, which is critical to successfully implementing multicultural curricula (Mardhatillah, 2022).

The existing literature on multicultural and pluralism education highlights the importance of promoting inclusivity and cultural respect within elementary school settings. However, implementing these values requires overcoming several barriers, particularly in terms of teacher preparation and curriculum limitations. The hypotheses developed underscore the potential of structured multicultural models and teacher training to enhance the effectiveness of multicultural education, fostering an educational environment that values and respects diversity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the implementation and impact of multicultural and pluralism education in Indonesian elementary schools. Data collection involves in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather insights from teachers, principals, and curriculum designers on their experiences and perceptions. The sample includes elementary schools from diverse cultural regions, providing a comprehensive view of how multicultural values are integrated within different school environments. Interviews with educators focus on their understanding, practices, and challenges in implementing multicultural education, while classroom observations capture real-time interactions and teaching practices that reflect multicultural values. Document analysis of lesson plans, school policies, and curricular materials supports understanding how these values are formally included and interpreted. Data analysis follows thematic coding, enabling the identification of recurring themes, challenges, and best practices. This approach provides a detailed understanding of the effectiveness of multicultural education strategies, the obstacles faced by educators, and the social outcomes for students in terms of inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section provides an analysis of the findings on implementing multicultural education in elementary schools, examining both the positive impacts and the challenges faced in fostering inclusivity in diverse classrooms. Additionally, theoretical and practical implications for enhancing multicultural education are discussed based on recent literature.

Positive Impacts of Multicultural Education on Student Outcomes

The implementation of multicultural education has shown numerous benefits, particularly in enhancing students' social and academic outcomes. Research demonstrates that multicultural practices, when incorporated thoughtfully, promote empathy, tolerance, and positive intergroup relations among students. Kaplowitz et al., (2023) illustrates that multicultural education encourages prejudice reduction, content integration, and equitable pedagogy, which contribute to improved intergroup relations and academic performance for all students, not solely those from minority backgrounds (Kaplowitz et al., 2023). The integration of multicultural values in teaching further supports cognitive development as students are exposed to diverse perspectives, encouraging critical thinking and a broader worldview.

Similarly, Miftakhul et al., (2020) emphasize that multicultural education fosters tolerance and inclusivity, particularly by teaching students to respect diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Their findings underscore that students in classrooms with multicultural curricula exhibit greater respect for differences, interact positively across cultures, and maintain harmonious relationships, which reduce potential conflicts (Miftakhul et al., 2020). This social harmony aligns with the broader goal of multicultural education: preparing students for a pluralistic society where cultural understanding and cooperation are essential.

Teacher Preparedness and Training as a Critical Factor

Teacher preparedness is a key factor in the success of multicultural education. Studies indicate that teachers play a significant role in fostering inclusivity but often face limitations due to insufficient training and lack of resources. According to Dike et al. (2020), many teachers lack awareness of multicultural values and thus struggle to implement inclusive practices in their teaching. This lack of awareness can inadvertently reinforce cultural biases, thereby hindering efforts to create a truly multicultural classroom (Dike, Parida, & Welerubun, 2020).

Furthermore, Washington (1981) found that the absence of multicultural training in teacher education programs results in educators who are not fully equipped to address the diverse needs of their students. This research advocates for more robust pre-service and in-service training programs to enhance teachers' capacity to deliver culturally responsive instruction effectively (Washington, 1981). Addressing this gap in teacher training is vital, as well-prepared teachers can positively influence both the academic and social outcomes of students by creating an environment that respects and reflects cultural diversity.

Challenges in Multicultural Education Implementation

Implementing multicultural education faces several structural challenges, particularly within the curriculum and school policies. One prominent challenge is the lack of integration of multicultural content within standard curricula, as highlighted by (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017). Schools often prioritize majority cultural narratives, with little inclusion of minority perspectives, leaving students from diverse backgrounds feeling marginalized (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017).

Multicultural education efforts can sometimes be contradictory, with schools inadvertently reinforcing cultural stereotypes instead of challenging them. This occurs when multicultural education lacks a critical framework and fails to address underlying issues of power and privilege in classroom interactions (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ngo, 2010). Thus, for multicultural education to be effective, it must go beyond superficial inclusion of cultural content and address the structural biases present within educational systems.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest several implications for enhancing multicultural education. First, there is a need for comprehensive policy support to embed multicultural principles within educational frameworks, allowing schools to address diversity systematically. Burns and Shadoian-Gersing (2010) argue that to harness the benefits of diversity, teacher training programs must prioritize multicultural competencies and foster lasting change in teaching practices. They also highlight the importance of linking teacher education with ongoing professional development to ensure that educators are equipped to navigate culturally diverse classrooms (Burns & Shadoian-Gersing, 2010).

Moreover, addressing curriculum biases requires revising educational materials to include diverse cultural perspectives genuinely. According to Celeste et al. (2019), policies that actively value cultural diversity, as opposed to colorblind or assimilationist approaches, yield more positive outcomes in terms of student belonging and academic achievement. This evidence suggests that a multicultural approach not only narrows achievement gaps but also enhances students' sense of inclusion and belonging (Celeste et al., 2019).

Practical Strategies for Effective Multicultural Education

Based on the literature, effective multicultural education requires practical strategies that extend beyond policy and curricular reforms. Mardhatillah (2022) suggests that schools should incorporate multicultural principles into managerial practices, fostering an environment where equity, fairness, and tolerance are integrated into all school activities. This involves not only curricular integration but also reinforcing multicultural values through school policies and administrative support (Mardhatillah, 2022).

In practice, (Grant, 2005; Keengwe, 2010) found that teachers can enhance multicultural education by creating lesson plans and teaching materials that reflect students' cultural backgrounds. They emphasize that consistent reinforcement of multicultural values is necessary, from structured lessons to daily interactions, to foster an inclusive classroom environment. Multicultural education has substantial benefits for student outcomes, enhancing both academic achievement and social relations. However, realizing these benefits requires overcoming challenges related to teacher preparedness, curriculum biases, and inadequate policy support. Schools must integrate multicultural values into all aspects of education, from curriculum design to teacher training and school management. With the right support and resources, multicultural education can fulfill its potential to create inclusive, tolerant, and diverse educational environments.

Discussion of Research Results

The research examined the impact of implementing multicultural education models in elementary schools, guided by two primary hypotheses: (1) implementing structured multicultural education models positively influences students' social attitudes and reduces biases, and (2) comprehensive multicultural training for teachers enhances the efficacy of multicultural education. The findings from this research align with these hypotheses, emphasizing that both effective program design and teacher training are essential for fostering inclusive, tolerant, and socially cohesive school environments. The following sections discuss these findings in detail and present their theoretical and practical implications.

Hypothesis 1: Positive Influence of Structured Multicultural Education on Students' Social Attitudes

The research supports the hypothesis that structured multicultural education significantly improves students' social attitudes, leading to greater inclusivity and empathy among students. Multicultural education, when integrated thoughtfully, promotes positive intergroup relations, as seen in other studies

where students exposed to multicultural content develop greater respect for cultural diversity and engage in more inclusive behaviors. For instance, studies by (Miftakhul et al., 2020) observed that students who received multicultural education demonstrated higher tolerance, respect for differences, and a decrease in conflicts in classrooms with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

These results also align with Banks' model of multicultural education, which advocates for integrating prejudice reduction, content integration, and equity pedagogy to foster social harmony. By focusing on these components, multicultural education not only reduces biases but also enhances social cohesion among students of varying backgrounds. This research confirms the model's effectiveness, suggesting that structured multicultural curricula can indeed be transformative in diverse educational contexts.

Theoretical Implications

The findings underscore that multicultural education must be designed not only to transmit knowledge but also to foster emotional and social skills, supporting theories that emphasize social constructivism and learning through social interaction. In line with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, multicultural education can be seen as a framework for facilitating cognitive and social development through interactions across cultural divides, which reinforce empathy, critical thinking, and mutual understanding. This integration supports the view that learning is inherently a social process influenced by cultural interactions, and that students exposed to diverse perspectives can develop more nuanced worldviews.

Practical Implications

In practical terms, these findings suggest that elementary schools should adopt comprehensive multicultural curricula, which include not only content on diverse cultures but also modules on empathy, communication, and conflict resolution. Schools should prioritize programs that include active, experiential learning—such as role-playing or community engagement activities—that foster empathy and cultural awareness. This holistic approach can significantly impact students' social development, preparing them to become compassionate citizens in a diverse society.

Hypothesis 2: Importance of Teacher Training in Enhancing Multicultural Education

The second hypothesis, which posits that teacher training in multicultural practices enhances the effectiveness of multicultural education, is well-supported by the research. Effective multicultural education is heavily reliant on teachers who are trained to navigate and value diversity in the classroom. As research by Dike et al., (2020) demonstrates, teachers often struggle to implement multicultural values due to limited training, leading to inconsistent or superficial multicultural practices (Dike et al., 2020). Similarly, Washington, (1981) highlights that without adequate training, teachers may unintentionally reinforce biases, emphasizing the necessity of professional development in multicultural competencies (Washington, 1981).

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to educational theory by supporting the notion that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are integral to implementing educational reforms. In alignment with theories of reflective practice, professional training in multicultural education encourages teachers to reflect on their own cultural biases and improve their pedagogical practices. This reflection is critical in developing a culturally responsive teaching framework, as proposed by Gay & Howard, (2000), which enables teachers to connect curriculum with students' lived experiences. The data underscore the role of teacher cognition and self-awareness in shaping a classroom environment that is truly inclusive.

Practical Implications

The practical implications are clear: educational policymakers and institutions should incorporate multicultural training into teacher education programs, with ongoing professional development as an essential component. Additionally, training modules should include techniques for managing diverse classrooms, designing inclusive lesson plans, and addressing cultural biases. By investing in teacher training, schools not only enhance the quality of multicultural education but also create sustainable systems where diversity is valued and integrated into daily school life.

Broader Implications and Future Directions

The research findings have implications that extend beyond individual classrooms and contribute to the wider discourse on educational equity and social justice. First, they highlight the need for policy reforms that support multicultural education in schools. Policies should mandate not only multicultural curricula but also standardized teacher training across educational levels. Celeste et al., (2019) note that schools that implement multicultural policies witness improved academic and social outcomes, narrowing achievement gaps and fostering a greater sense of belonging among minority students.

Second, there is a need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of multicultural education on students' attitudes and behaviors as they transition from elementary school to higher education. Future research could explore how early exposure to multicultural education influences students' career choices, civic engagement, and social attitudes in adulthood, thereby contributing valuable insights into how educational practices shape societal values over time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that implementing structured multicultural education models in elementary schools significantly enhances students' social attitudes, fostering inclusivity, empathy, and reduced biases. Additionally, comprehensive multicultural training for teachers improves the efficacy of these educational models by equipping educators to manage and value diversity more effectively in the classroom. Both hypotheses were supported, underscoring the importance of structured multicultural curricula and robust teacher training as critical factors for successful multicultural education.

Study Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its qualitative approach, which may not capture the full quantitative impact on academic outcomes across diverse settings. Furthermore, the study's focus on elementary schools may limit generalizability to higher education levels, where student interactions and educational demands differ.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to explore the long-term impacts of multicultural education on students' social attitudes, career choices, and civic engagement into adulthood. Additionally, quantitative studies across multiple educational levels would provide a broader understanding of multicultural education's effects, helping to shape policies that promote inclusivity throughout the entire education system.

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