

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND THE STRENGTHENING OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Abstrak: Indonesia sebagai bangsa yang majemuk menghadapi tantangan serius berupa meningkatnya intoleransi, konflik berbasis identitas, dan melemahnya nilai-nilai karakter kebangsaan. Kondisi ini menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan belum sepenuhnya mampu mengelola keberagaman sebagai kekuatan sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis konsep pendidikan multikultural dalam konteks sosial, budaya, dan historis bangsa Indonesia serta relevansinya dalam penguatan pendidikan karakter. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian kepustakaan melalui analisis kritis terhadap literatur ilmiah, pemikiran para ahli, dan dokumen kebijakan pendidikan yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan multikultural berperan strategis sebagai paradigma pendidikan yang menekankan kesetaraan, penghormatan terhadap perbedaan, dan keadilan sosial, serta berfungsi sebagai fondasi penguatan pendidikan karakter berbasis konteks keindonesiaan. Integrasi pendidikan multikultural dan pendidikan karakter terbukti mampu membangun sikap toleran, empatik, dan demokratis pada peserta didik. Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya pengarusutamaan pendidikan multikultural dalam kurikulum, budaya sekolah, dan kebijakan pendidikan nasional guna membentuk karakter bangsa yang inklusif dan berkeadaban.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Multikultural, Pendidikan Karakter, Konteks Indonesia

Abstract: Indonesia, as a pluralistic nation, faces serious challenges in the form of increasing intolerance, identity-based conflicts, and the weakening of national character values. This condition indicates that education has not yet fully functioned as a means of managing diversity as a social strength. This study aims to analyze the concept of multicultural education within the social, cultural, and historical context of Indonesia and examine its relevance to strengthening character education. The research employs a qualitative approach using library research methods through critical analysis of scholarly literature, expert perspectives, and relevant educational policy documents. The findings reveal that multicultural education plays a strategic role as an educational paradigm that emphasizes equality, respect for differences, and social justice, and serves as a foundational framework for strengthening character education grounded in the Indonesian context. The integration of multicultural education and character education is shown to foster tolerant, empathetic, and democratic attitudes among students. The implications of this study highlight the importance of mainstreaming multicultural education within curricula, school culture, and national education policies to develop an inclusive and civilized national character.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Character Education, Indonesian Context

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a nation built on a foundation of complex diversity, encompassing a variety of ethnicities, religions, languages, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds that are intertwined in the life of the nation and state (Siddik et al., 2025). This multicultural reality is not merely a sociological fact, but rather the constitutive identity of the Indonesian nation as reflected in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). However, in practice, this diversity does not always transform into a productive social force. Various conflicts based on identity, intolerance, radicalism, discrimination, and the weakening of national values show that diversity can become a source of social fragmentation if it is not managed through appropriate educational mechanisms (Jufri et al., 2024).

It is in this context that multicultural education becomes a strategic and relevant issue. Education not only functions as a means of transferring knowledge, but also as a vehicle for shaping the awareness, attitudes, and character of students so that they are able to live together fairly and with dignity in a diverse society (Hoon, 2013; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Multicultural education views humans as the main subjects of education, who have dignity, rights, and the potential to develop in responsible freedom. This perspective is in line with the humanistic view of education that places humans as the goal, not merely a tool for development (Qorib & Lubis, 2023).

Historically, the idea of multicultural education developed alongside the increasing plurality of modern societies, especially in

Western countries after World War II. Mass migration, civil rights struggles, and criticism of cultural assimilation policies gave rise to a new awareness of the importance of recognition, respect, and justice for minority groups. The thinking of figures such as John Dewey and Will Kymlicka emphasized that democracy cannot be separated from the recognition of differences and the protection of individual and collective rights in expressing cultural identity. However, the Western experience cannot be adopted wholesale in the Indonesian context, which has a different history, social structure, and cultural dynamics (Santrock, 2013).

After the reform, Indonesia faced serious challenges in maintaining social cohesion. The multidimensional crisis that has been going on since the late 1990s has not only affected economic and political aspects, but also triggered a socio-cultural crisis characterized by weakening social solidarity, increasing horizontal conflicts, and strengthening identity politics. This situation shows that national development has not been fully balanced with the strengthening of a national character rooted in the values of tolerance, justice, and respect for diversity. Education, as a strategic instrument of the state, is required to respond to these challenges in a more substantive and contextual manner (Tilaar, 2012; Zubaedi, 2015).

On the other hand, character education has become an important agenda in national education policy. Character education is aimed at shaping students who are faithful, noble, democratic, and responsible as citizens. However, the implementation of character

education is often normative and detached from the multicultural social reality that students face every day. Character values are taught abstractly without being contextualized in life experiences amid religious, cultural, and social identity differences. As a result, character education loses its transformative power in building inclusive and empathetic attitudes.

This article is based on the assumption that multicultural education and character education are not two separate entities, but are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Multicultural education provides an epistemological and pedagogical framework for understanding and managing diversity, while character education provides an ethical and moral foundation for shaping students' personalities. The integration of the two in the Indonesian context is an urgent necessity for building a democratic, civilized, and socially just society.

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the concept of multicultural education and its relevance in strengthening character education in Indonesia, taking into account the social, cultural, and historical context of the Indonesian nation. This article also aims to formulate an integrative conceptual understanding of how multicultural education can contribute significantly to the formation of students' character that is tolerant, inclusive, and oriented towards national values.

The distinction of this research lies in its attempt to directly link multicultural education with the agenda of strengthening character education within the framework of Indonesianness. Unlike previous studies that

tended to discuss multicultural education normatively or adopt a Western perspective, this article places Indonesian social experience as the main basis for analysis. Thus, multicultural education is not understood as a universal concept that is free of context, but rather as a pedagogical approach that must be reinterpreted in accordance with the values, history, and needs of Indonesian society.

This research contribution is expected to enrich the scientific knowledge of education, particularly in the study of multicultural education and character education. Theoretically, this article offers an integrative conceptual framework that links cultural diversity with the formation of national character. Practically, the results of this study can be used as a reference for educators, education managers, and policy makers in designing learning strategies and education policies that are more responsive to the multicultural reality of Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in the formulation of a new understanding of multicultural education as a strategic instrument for strengthening character education rooted in Indonesian national values. By placing multicultural education as an integral part of character education, this article offers an alternative perspective in addressing the problems of intolerance, social disintegration, and character crisis in Indonesia's diverse society.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand, interpret, and analyze in depth

the concept of multicultural education and its relevance in strengthening character education in the Indonesian context. The focus of the research is not on statistical measurement of variables, but rather on exploring the meanings, ideas, and conceptual constructs that have developed in academic discourse and educational policy.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources include scientific works in the form of books, reputable journal articles, and academic writings discussing multicultural education, character education, democracy, pluralism, and education policy, both from a global and Indonesian perspective. The thoughts of key figures such as John Dewey, Will Kymlicka, H.A.R. Tilaar, and Azyumardi Azra were used as the main references to strengthen the theoretical basis of the research. Secondary data sources include national education policy documents, previous research reports, and other publications relevant to the research theme.

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation studies, namely by identifying, classifying, and inventorying various literature relevant to the focus of the study. The collected literature was then selected based on criteria of relevance, source credibility, and its contribution to the discussion of multicultural education and character education in the Indonesian context. This process was carried out systematically to ensure that the data used had sufficient academic validity.

Data analysis techniques used content analysis with a descriptive-analytical and critical approach. The collected data were

analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, the researchers filtered the main ideas related to the concepts, principles, and implementation of multicultural education and its relationship to character education strengthening. Next, the data is presented in the form of analytical narratives that connect theory, the Indonesian social context, and education policy. The final stage involves drawing inductive conclusions to formulate integrative conceptual findings.

To maintain data validity, this study applied the technique of triangulation sources by comparing various expert views and previous research results. Thus, the findings are expected to have an adequate level of credibility, consistency, and analytical acuity as a scientific contribution to the study of multicultural education and character education strengthening in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Multicultural Education in the Social, Cultural, and Historical Context of the Indonesian Nation

Multicultural education is essentially a pedagogical response to social realities characterized by diversity in cultural identity, ethnicity, religion, language, and social background. In the context of Indonesia, this concept cannot be understood ahistorically or separated from the social and cultural dynamics that have shaped the nation's journey. From the outset, Indonesia has been a pluralistic society formed by the long interaction of various local civilizations, religions, and global influences (Mahfud, 2013; Naim, 2017). Therefore, multicultural

education must be positioned as an educational approach that departs from the social reality of the nation, not merely an adoption of normative concepts from Western experience.

Conceptually, multicultural education is rooted in the view that education is a process of humanizing humans. Education aims not only to develop intellectual abilities, but also to shape social awareness, ethical attitudes, and the ability to live together in diversity. From this perspective, humans are understood as cultural beings whose identities are shaped through social interaction and the cultural environment. Therefore, education is never culturally neutral, but is always intertwined with the values, norms, and traditions of the society in which it takes place.

Historically, the discourse on multicultural education developed alongside criticism of assimilationist education models that negated differences. In the United States, for example, multicultural education emerged as a corrective to the dominance of the majority culture that marginalized minority groups. However, the context in Indonesia is fundamentally different. Diversity in Indonesia is not solely the result of modern migration, but rather a structural and historical condition that has been inherent since the formation of the nation. Therefore, multicultural education in Indonesia does not merely aim to protect minorities, but also to build collective awareness of unity in diversity.

The concept of multiculturalism in Indonesian education must be understood as recognition of cultural plurality within a

framework of equality. Multiculturalism is not merely a fact of diversity, but an ideology that affirms that every cultural group has equal dignity and the right to be recognized in the public sphere (Hoon, 2013; Tilaar, 2014). From this perspective, multicultural education becomes a strategic instrument for instilling the values of democracy, social justice, and respect for human rights.

Experts provide various definitions of multicultural education, but they share a common thread. James A. Banks views multicultural education as a concept and process of educational reform that recognizes the importance of cultural diversity in shaping individual identity and educational opportunities (Banks, 2016). Andersen and Cusher emphasize multicultural education as education about cultural diversity, where diversity becomes the object of study and a source of learning (Anderson, 2003). Meanwhile, Indonesian thinkers such as Zakiyuddin Baidhawi and M. Ainul Yaqin emphasize multicultural education as a pedagogical strategy that utilizes student differences as a strength in the learning process (Wulandari & Baidhawiy, 2019).

In the Indonesian social context, multicultural education must be positioned as an effort to build intercultural awareness. This awareness does not stop at recognizing differences, but goes beyond passive tolerance to active appreciation of diversity. Multicultural education teaches students to understand that cultural differences are not a threat, but rather a social asset that can enrich communal life. This view is relevant to the character of Indonesian society, which lives in

a cultural mosaic where local and national identities interact dynamically.

Historically, the challenges of multicultural education in Indonesia have become increasingly complex since the reform era. The weakening of authoritarian state control has opened up space for the expression of identity, but it has also given rise to horizontal conflicts based on ethnicity and religion. In this situation, multicultural education has a strategic role as a means of reconstructing national consciousness. Education should not only reproduce knowledge, but must also be a space for cultural dialogue that allows students to critically reflect on their own identities and those of others (Suparlan, 2014; Wahyudi, 2018).

Thus, the concept of multicultural education in the Indonesian context can be understood as a process of developing the full potential of human beings who value diversity, affirm equality, and build a moral commitment to social justice. Multicultural education is not merely a curricular approach, but rather an educational paradigm that places diversity as the foundation for building a democratic and civilized Indonesian society.

The Relevance of Multicultural Education in Strengthening Character Education in Indonesia

Multicultural education has a very strong relevance in strengthening character education in Indonesia, especially in facing the challenges of a crisis of values, intolerance, and social disintegration. Character education basically aims to shape individuals who have noble character, are

responsible, and have a sense of as citizens. However, this goal is difficult to achieve if character education is not contextualized within the reality of a multicultural society.

In practice, character education in Indonesia is often normative and verbalistic. Values such as tolerance, honesty, and mutual cooperation are taught as abstract concepts without being linked to the concrete experiences of students in their daily lives. As a result, character education is less able to shape reflective attitudes and behaviors. This is where multicultural education plays a role as an approach that contextualizes character values in real situations of cultural, religious, and social identity diversity.

Multicultural education places character values as the result of a conscious and reflective social interaction process. The value of tolerance, for example, is not only taught as a moral norm, but is practiced through intercultural dialogue, cross-group cooperation, and fair management of differences. Thus, character education does not stop at the cognitive realm, but develops in the affective and behavioral realms (Kirom, 2017; Mustafida, 2020).

The relevance of multicultural education is also evident in its efforts to develop three main aspects of character education, namely attitude, knowledge, and social skills. In terms of attitude, multicultural education fosters cultural sensitivity, empathy, and respect for other people's identities. In terms of knowledge, students are equipped with an understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives, enabling them to view social realities in a more inclusive manner.

Meanwhile, in terms of skills, multicultural education trains students in intercultural communication, conflict resolution, and democratic decision-making.

In the context of national education policy, multicultural education can serve as a framework for strengthening the implementation of character education. A multicultural curriculum not only includes material on cultural diversity, but also integrates character values into all subjects and school activities. Schools are positioned as miniatures of a multicultural society, where the values of democracy, justice, and equality are practiced in everyday life (Junaidi, 2017; Muliadi, 1970).

H.A.R. Tilaar's view emphasizes that multicultural education is part of the cultural dynamics of society. Education must transcend the function of knowledge transmission and act as an agent of social transformation. In this context, character education based on multiculturalism not only shapes moral individuals, but also critical and responsible citizens who are aware of social diversity (Tilaar, 2012, 2014).

The ideas of James A. Banks and Bikhu Parekh further reinforce the relevance of multicultural education in character building. Banks emphasizes that multicultural education must be embedded in all dimensions of education, from the curriculum and learning strategies to social relations at school. Meanwhile, Parekh views multicultural education as education towards freedom, namely freedom from ethnocentric prejudice and freedom to learn from other cultures. This perspective shows that multicultural education not only shapes

personal character, but also social character oriented towards social transformation.

Thus, multicultural education is relevant as a foundation for strengthening character education in Indonesia because it is able to bridge moral values with pluralistic social realities. Multicultural education helps shape the character of students who are not only good individually, but also fair, inclusive, and socially responsible. The integration of multicultural education and character education is a key strategy in building an Indonesian nation that is tolerant and civilized amid diversity.

Integration of Multicultural Education as the Foundation for Strengthening Character Education Based on the Indonesian Context

The main novelty of this study lies in the conceptual formulation of multicultural education as an integrative foundation for strengthening character education that is contextually rooted in the social, cultural, and historical realities of the Indonesian nation. Unlike previous studies that tended to position multicultural education and character education as two parallel pedagogical agendas, this study shows that multicultural education can actually function as a foundational framework for the internalization of character values in national education.

The findings of this study confirm that strengthening character education in Indonesia cannot be done effectively if it is separated from the context of social diversity. Normative, moralistic, and ahistorical character education has the

potential to lose its transformative power because it does not directly address the reality of diversity experienced by students. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis that character values such as tolerance, justice, empathy, social responsibility, and democracy can only grow authentically through reflective and dialogical multicultural learning experiences.

This study also offers conceptual innovation by viewing multicultural education not merely as a curricular approach or additional learning strategy, but as a paradigm of character education based on national culture. In the Indonesian context, multicultural education is understood as a process of reconstructing national consciousness that integrates local and national identities and universal values in a balanced manner. This approach differs from Western models of multiculturalism, which focus more on minority issues and civil rights, because places the emphasis on unity in diversity.

The next novelty lies in the practical implications offered, namely the integration of multicultural education into the entire education ecosystem—curriculum, school culture, teacher-student relationships, and education policy—as a means of shaping the collective character of the nation. Multicultural education does not only function in the cognitive realm, but simultaneously shapes the affective and social dimensions of students. Thus, character education is not understood as a subject or incidental program, but as a living and continuous educational experience.

Overall, the novelty of this research lies in the shift in perspective from individualistic character education to social and nationalistic character education through multicultural education. These findings provide conceptual and strategic contributions in responding to the challenges of intolerance, social fragmentation, and character crisis in Indonesia, as well as strengthening the position of multicultural education as the main instrument for national character building in a multicultural society (Arifin, 2019; Wahyudi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education is a strategic approach in responding to the reality of Indonesia's social, cultural, and historical diversity. Diversity, which is a constitutive identity of the nation, does not always bring harmony, but also has the potential to give rise to conflict and disintegration if it is not managed through an education system oriented towards the values of equality, justice, and respect for differences. In this context, multicultural education is not merely understood as an introduction to diversity, but as an educational paradigm that humanizes people and fosters intercultural awareness. The results of the discussion show that multicultural education has strong relevance in strengthening character education in Indonesia. Character values such as tolerance, empathy, social responsibility, and democratic attitudes can only develop authentically if they are internalized through contextual and reflective learning experiences in situations of real diversity. The integration of

multicultural education and character education is key to developing students who are not only morally upright as individuals but also have social and national awareness. The novelty of this research lies in the formulation of multicultural education as the foundation for strengthening character education based on the Indonesian context. These findings confirm that multicultural education must be placed as the main paradigm in national character building, so that education can act as an agent of social transformation in realizing an inclusive, democratic, and civilized Indonesian society.

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