

The Role of Merdeka Curriculum in Supporting Multicultural Education in Primary Schools (A Qualitative Case Study at SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember, East Java)

Ahmad Rokib¹, Abd Muhith², Maskud³

¹²³Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia
ahmadrokib651@gmail.com¹, abdmuhith1972@gmail.com², maskud@uinkhas.ac.id³

Abstract

The growing need for inclusive education in Indonesia requires curriculum innovations that support multicultural values from an early age. Despite this potential, empirical evidence on how effectively the Merdeka Curriculum promotes multicultural values at the primary level remains limited. This study explores the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting multicultural education in primary schools. Using a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach, the research was conducted at SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember, East Java. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving teachers, students, parents, and school leaders. The findings reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum enables the integration of multicultural content through flexible learning designs. Teachers use diverse cultural stories and learning materials to foster tolerance and appreciation of differences. The implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5), particularly under the theme “Unity in Diversity,” encourages collaborative, experiential learning rooted in cultural identity. Furthermore, student and parent responses indicate increased awareness and pride in cultural heritage. The study concludes that the Merdeka Curriculum serves as an effective platform to strengthen multicultural awareness and social harmony in elementary education. However, its success relies on school leadership, teacher competence, and community involvement. This research contributes to the growing discourse on culturally responsive education in Indonesia and highlights the importance of policy alignment and support in promoting multicultural practices in schools.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; Multicultural Education; Primary School; P5; Inclusive Learning.

Abstrak

Kebutuhan akan pendidikan inklusif di Indonesia mendorong inovasi kurikulum yang mendukung nilai-nilai multikultural sejak dini. Meskipun demikian, bukti empiris mengenai sejauh mana Kurikulum Merdeka mendorong nilai-nilai multikultural di jenjang sekolah dasar masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran Kurikulum Merdeka dalam mendukung pendidikan multikultural di sekolah dasar. Penelitian ini

menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember, Jawa Timur. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan guru, siswa, orang tua, dan pimpinan sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka memungkinkan integrasi konten multikultural melalui desain pembelajaran yang fleksibel. Guru memanfaatkan cerita rakyat dan materi ajar yang beragam untuk menumbuhkan toleransi dan penghargaan terhadap perbedaan. Pelaksanaan Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) dengan tema “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” mendorong pembelajaran kolaboratif dan kontekstual berbasis identitas budaya. Respons siswa dan orang tua menunjukkan peningkatan kesadaran serta kebanggaan terhadap warisan budaya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka menjadi wadah yang efektif dalam menumbuhkan kesadaran multikultural dan harmoni sosial di pendidikan dasar. Namun, keberhasilannya sangat bergantung pada kepemimpinan sekolah, kompetensi guru, dan keterlibatan masyarakat. Penelitian ini memperkaya diskursus pendidikan responsif budaya di Indonesia serta menekankan pentingnya dukungan kebijakan dalam implementasi pendidikan multikultural di sekolah.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka; Pendidikan Multikultural; Sekolah Dasar; P5; Pembelajaran Inklusif.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, multicultural education has emerged as a crucial component of schooling systems. According to (Osso, 2008), multicultural education refers to an educational approach that aims to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. It promotes values such as tolerance, social justice, and mutual respect essential for nurturing democratic citizenship. The need to integrate multicultural values in early education is especially significant in primary schools, where children's perspectives about diversity and difference begin to form. As schools become microcosms of society, multicultural education becomes a strategic tool for social cohesion and peacebuilding.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in two complementary frameworks. First, Banks' (2019) dimensions of multicultural education—content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture—provide a systematic lens for identifying how diversity is embedded across curriculum, instruction, and school climate. Second, the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, developed by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2018), emphasizes teaching that draws on students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference to make learning

more meaningful and equitable. Taken together, these frameworks position multicultural education not as an isolated add-on but as an integrated practice connecting curricular content, pedagogical strategy, and the wider school environment. This theoretical synthesis guides the analysis of how the Merdeka Curriculum operationalizes multicultural values in the present case.

Globally, many education systems have made efforts to institutionalize multicultural education in both curriculum and pedagogy. In countries like Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, policies on inclusive education emphasize cultural sensitivity, anti-bias instruction, and the integration of diverse cultural narratives in school materials (Anggraeni et al., 2023). However, challenges such as curriculum rigidity, limited teacher training, and ethnocentric content remain barriers to full implementation. These international trends reflect a common understanding: the success of multicultural education depends heavily on curricular frameworks that are responsive, inclusive, and flexible.

In the Indonesian context, multiculturalism is not merely a pedagogical choice but a national imperative. Indonesia is home to over 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of local languages, making it one of the most diverse nations in the world. Despite this, issues such as ethnic stereotyping, religious intolerance, and social polarization have occasionally surfaced within school environments (Widiantari et al., 2021). These challenges underscore the importance of cultivating multicultural values early in formal education. The government has responded through various policy innovations, one of which is the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum or "Freedom Curriculum" launched in 2022.

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, local cultural integration, and differentiated instruction. One of its core principles is to provide learning experiences that are relevant to students' sociocultural contexts. This curriculum opens space for schools to design projects and learning modules that highlight local wisdom and cultural diversity, thereby potentially serving as a platform for multicultural education (Zakiah et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there is limited empirical evidence showing how effectively this curriculum supports multicultural values at the elementary level.

Previous studies have explored the implementation of multicultural education in various school contexts. For example, (Lasmawan et al., 2024) examined the integration of local culture in learning materials in West Java, while (Idris & Adawiyah, 2023) analyzed teacher strategies in promoting tolerance in multicultural classrooms. However, these studies were conducted under the previous 2013 Curriculum (Ramadhan & Usriyah, 2021) and did

not examine the structural contributions of the new Merdeka Curriculum. This presents a research gap regarding how recent curricular reforms impact the practice of multicultural education, especially in primary schools.

A closer reading of this literature, however, shows that the gap is not merely chronological but analytical, and it can be specified along four lines. The first concerns studies carried out under the 2013 Curriculum. Work in this tradition, including Chotimah (2018), Wakano (2019), Ramadhan and Usriyah (2021), Riyanti and Novitasari (2021), and Azizatul 'uula et al. (2022), consistently demonstrates that local wisdom (kearifan lokal) can be inserted into elementary learning materials, yet it locates multicultural education almost entirely in what is taught and treats the curriculum itself as a neutral container. Because the 2013 Curriculum prescribed content and learning outcomes centrally, these studies could not, in principle, observe whether the curricular structure granted teachers the discretionary space to make such choices; multicultural practice consequently appears in their accounts as an individual teacher initiative rather than as a structurally supported one. Idris and Adawiyah (2023) likewise analyse teacher strategies for promoting tolerance, but treat strategy as a matter of individual pedagogical style, detached from the curricular architecture that permits or restricts it. A further shortcoming is that this body of work is usually anchored in a single dominant regional culture—Balinese, Maluku, or Javanese—so that it documents the transmission of one culture rather than the negotiation of several cultures within one classroom.

The second line concerns studies of the Merdeka Curriculum itself, which remain largely normative, policy-level, or subject-bound. Zakiah et al. (2023) examine the teaching of multicultural values through civic education, and Lasmawan et al. (2024) propose a culture-based model of multicultural education; valuable as they are, both stop at the level of stated curricular intentions or model design and do not follow the curriculum into everyday classroom practice. As a result, the structural features that actually distinguish the Merdeka Curriculum from its predecessor—flexible learning design, differentiated instruction, and school-level curricular autonomy—are asserted as advantages rather than empirically traced to observable multicultural outcomes. The third line is the most conspicuous: the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5), which is the curriculum's principal experiential vehicle and the only structure explicitly devoted to the theme of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, has not been examined as a mechanism of multicultural learning. It is generally discussed as a generic character-formation programme or evaluated in terms of implementation readiness and

administrative constraints, without observational evidence of how primary school students actually encounter, negotiate, and interpret cultural difference within it.

The fourth line concerns the level of analysis. Studies that do report school-level multicultural activity tend to describe it as celebratory and event-based rather than embedded in daily instruction; Irwan et al. (2022) reach precisely this conclusion, although at the adolescent rather than the primary level, and they stop short of identifying the conditions under which such practice becomes routine. Elementary schools, where children's dispositions toward difference are first formed, thus remain the least examined setting, and the factors that enable multicultural practice—teacher competence, school leadership, and community participation—are typically listed as closing recommendations rather than analysed as operative conditions. Taken together, these four shortcomings sharpen the gap addressed in the present study: no research has yet traced, at the primary level, how the two mechanisms specific to the Merdeka Curriculum—the flexibility of learning design and the P5 project—translate curricular policy into observable multicultural practice, nor identified the conditions under which that practice can be sustained or would be difficult to replicate.

Building on these studies, the novelty of the present research lies in its specific focus on how the Merdeka Curriculum Indonesia's most recent curricular reform—structurally supports multicultural education at the primary level, an aspect not yet examined by earlier work conducted under the 2013 Curriculum. Unlike previous studies that mainly documented the general integration of local culture, this study offers an original contribution by empirically tracing multicultural practice through two curriculum-specific mechanisms: the flexibility of learning design and the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5). In doing so, it links national policy reform directly to classroom-level multicultural practice in an under-researched elementary setting.

To address this gap, the current study seeks to explore the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting multicultural education in primary schools. This research aims to (1) identify how multicultural values are embedded within the design and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) examine the strategies used by primary school teachers to promote multicultural education under this curriculum, and (3) assess the extent to which the curriculum facilitates the development of students' multicultural awareness. Through this research, it is expected that a clearer understanding of the intersection between curricular policy and multicultural education practices in Indonesia's primary education context can be developed.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum supports multicultural education in a primary school setting. A case study is considered suitable because it allows the researcher to examine a phenomenon intensively within its real-life context (Sugiyono, 2013). The research was conducted at SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember, a public primary school chosen due to its active implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its location within a culturally diverse community. The school also regularly organizes activities that promote local wisdom and cultural appreciation among students.

The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) directly involved in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) experienced in multicultural classroom practices, and (3) willing to provide rich, relevant information. The research involved a total of twelve informants: one school principal, to gain insights into school policy and curriculum strategy; three classroom teachers (from grades 3, 4, and 5), to understand classroom-level practices; one curriculum coordinator, to explain the school's curriculum planning and adjustments; five students (from grades 4 and 5), to capture learners' perspectives on multicultural learning; and two parents, to gather community perceptions and involvement.

The number of informants was determined by the principle of information adequacy rather than statistical representativeness, which is appropriate for a qualitative case study. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached that is, when additional interviews no longer produced new themes so that the twelve participants (one principal, one curriculum coordinator, three teachers, five students, and two parents) collectively represented the policy, instructional, learner, and community perspectives relevant to the research questions. To strengthen transparency and consistency, data collection was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol and an observation checklist. The interview guide covered four areas: (1) understanding of multicultural values, (2) strategies for integrating cultural diversity into learning, (3) the role of the P5 project, and (4) supporting and constraining factors. The observation checklist recorded indicators such as the use of culturally diverse materials, patterns of teacher–student and student–student interaction, student participation and reflection, and the display of multicultural elements in the classroom and school environment.

Data were collected through three primary techniques. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all informants to explore their experiences and views related to multicultural education under the Merdeka Curriculum. Second, non-participant observations were carried out in the classrooms to document real-time teaching activities, teacher-student interactions, and the school's multicultural environment. Third, document analysis was conducted on lesson plans, student projects, school programs, and curriculum documents relevant to multicultural themes.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of (Firman Aulia Ramadhan, 2022), which includes three steps: data condensation (selecting and summarizing essential information), data display (organizing data into visual or textual formats for interpretation), and conclusion drawing and verification (interpreting the meaning of data and verifying findings through triangulation and member checking).

To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, several validation techniques were applied, including triangulation of sources and methods, member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations with key informants, prolonged engagement in the research setting to build trust and gather comprehensive data, and thick description to provide rich contextual detail for transferability.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The identities of informants were kept confidential, and ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. The study also received formal permission from the school authorities before being conducted.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Supporting Multicultural Education Integration of Multicultural Values into Teaching and Learning

Based on classroom observations, teachers at SDN 1 Sukorambi have actively integrated multicultural values into daily instruction. For example, in a fourth-grade Indonesian language lesson, students read and discussed folk tales from various regions in Indonesia. This activity was designed not only to develop literacy skills but also to foster cultural awareness and appreciation of diversity.

Observation Notes:

Edisi : Vol. 10, No. 2, Juni/2026, hlm. 517-534

Date: March 14, 2025 – Grade 4 Class – 09:30 AM

The teacher used a story titled “Si Pitung” from Betawi culture and asked students to compare it with “Malin Kundang” from West Sumatra. Students were encouraged to reflect on the moral values and unique cultural elements in each story. One student shared, “My parents are from Madura, and we also have a hero like that!” The class responded enthusiastically.

Raw Interview Excerpts:

Grade 4 Teacher:

“I often use folk stories from various ethnic groups as teaching material. The children learn about different traditions and begin to respect the uniqueness of each culture. It's part of our effort to instill tolerance and open-mindedness.”

Grade 5 Student:

“I enjoy learning stories from other regions. It helps me understand that my classmates have different traditions, and that’s okay.”

These findings indicate that multicultural content is not treated as an abstract concept but embedded in actual learning experiences. The curriculum’s flexibility enables teachers to adapt lesson content that reflects Indonesia’s pluralistic society, aligning well with the goals of multicultural education.

Strengthening Multicultural Competence through Pancasila Student Profile Projects (P5)

One of the flagship components of the Merdeka Curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile Project (Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila or P5). At SDN 1 Sukorambi, one of the main themes implemented under P5 is “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity). The project involves students working in groups to create cultural exhibitions showcasing traditional foods, dances, costumes, and languages from various ethnic groups represented in their classroom or community.

Observation Notes:

Date: March 27, 2025 – School Hall – 10:00 AM

Students from Grade 4 and 5 participated in a cultural day. They wore traditional attire, performed regional dances (including Javanese, Madurese, and Sundanese), and prepared booths displaying regional snacks. Teachers facilitated reflection sessions where students

discussed what they learned about other cultures. One child said, “I didn’t know Balinese people greet each other differently. Now I want to visit Bali.”

Raw Interview Excerpts:

School Principal:

“Through the P5 projects, we want students to practice tolerance—not just learn it in theory. These activities help build empathy and understanding, especially in our culturally mixed community.”

Parent Representative:

“I’m proud to see my child introduce Madurese food to their classmates. It makes them feel seen and respected.”

From the above data, it is evident that P5 projects offer a hands-on platform for multicultural engagement. The curriculum’s structure encourages cross-cultural learning through collaboration, creativity, and reflection, rather than passive memorization.

To improve readability, the following thematic summary consolidates the main findings by linking each theme to its supporting evidence and to the research objective it addresses (see Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Findings

Theme	Supporting Evidence (Data Source)	Research Objective Addressed
Integration of multicultural values into teaching and learning	Grade-4 language lesson comparing the folk tales “Si Pitung” (Betawi) and “Malin Kundang” (West Sumatra); classroom observation (14 March 2025); teacher and student interviews on using folk stories to nurture tolerance	RO1: how multicultural values are embedded in curriculum design and implementation; RO2: teacher strategies
Experiential learning through the P5 project “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”	Cultural day (27 March 2025) featuring traditional attire, Javanese, Madurese, and Sundanese dances, and regional food booths; principal interview; post-activity reflection sessions	RO2: teacher strategies; RO3: development of students’ multicultural awareness

Community and parental involvement	Parent introducing Madurese cuisine to the class; parent interview expressing pride and a sense of recognition	RO3: students' multicultural awareness; contextual conditions for success
Enabling and constraining factors	Supportive school leadership; teacher agency in selecting culturally diverse materials; dependence on teacher competence and training	RO1 and RO3: the extent to which the curriculum facilitates multicultural awareness

Discussion

Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to Previous Studies

The findings from SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum significantly supports multicultural education in primary schools. The flexible structure of the curriculum enables educators to adapt teaching materials to reflect local and national cultural diversity, allowing students to learn about differences in a meaningful, contextually relevant manner. This aligns with (Osso, 2008) foundational theory of multicultural education, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive learning experiences that prepare students to engage in democratic and diverse societies.

One of the key strengths observed in the study is the integration of multicultural content through the use of Indonesian folk tales in language instruction. In a Grade 4 classroom, for example, students compared the stories of "Si Pitung" from Betawi culture and "Malin Kundang" from West Sumatra, which facilitated not only literacy development but also cross-cultural understanding. This approach echoes the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, as described by (Azizatul 'uula et al., 2022), who argues that integrating students' cultural knowledge into the curriculum enhances engagement and respect for diversity.

Previous research by (Pageh, 2021) supports this finding. Their study on the use of local folklore in elementary education in Yogyakarta revealed that stories from various ethnic backgrounds effectively fostered tolerance and mutual respect among students. Similarly, (Munardji et al., 2020) highlighted that culturally integrated teaching materials in Acehnese elementary schools led to increased cultural empathy and awareness among learners. These

studies reinforce the notion that folk narratives serve as effective pedagogical tools in multicultural education when incorporated thoughtfully into classroom activities.

In addition to instructional content, the role of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila, or P5) was pivotal in operationalizing multicultural education through experiential learning. The thematic project “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” implemented at SDN 1 Sukorambi provided students with opportunities to explore, present, and celebrate cultural differences through exhibitions of traditional attire, food, and performances. This form of project-based learning mirrors what (Winaja et al., 2019) termed as “transformative multicultural education,” where students not only learn about diversity but actively engage in collaborative experiences that promote equity, empathy, and social justice.

The reflective sessions conducted after the P5 activities, where students shared their insights about different cultural greetings or foods, demonstrate the internalization of multicultural values. As described by (Riyanti & Novitasari, 2021), such reflective pedagogy allows learners to connect personal experiences with broader cultural realities, thereby deepening their intercultural competence. A student expressing interest in visiting Bali after learning about Balinese greetings indicates not only cognitive understanding but affective engagement—an essential outcome of effective multicultural education.

Furthermore, the active involvement of parents in these multicultural school projects reveals an important aspect of community-based education. The participation of a parent introducing Madurese cuisine to classmates validates student identity and promotes inclusive school culture. This finding resonates with Epstein’s (2011) framework of school-family-community partnerships, which posits that involving families in culturally themed educational activities strengthens student engagement and learning outcomes. Research by Suparno et al. (2020) in Central Java also supports this, showing that parental involvement in cultural learning projects led to stronger student motivation and improved social cohesion in schools.

From the teachers' perspective, the freedom to select culturally diverse teaching materials under the Merdeka Curriculum has proven beneficial. Teachers interviewed in this study reported feeling more empowered to design lessons that reflect their students’ diverse backgrounds. This observation supports the work of (Wakano, 2019), who found that teachers operating under the older 2013 Curriculum (Ramadhan & Usriyah, 2021) often faced restrictions due to centralized content guidelines. By contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum’s

decentralized nature allows for differentiated instruction, a key component in equitable multicultural education (Tomlinson, 2014).

However, while the findings demonstrate numerous strengths, some limitations should be addressed. For instance, the successful integration of multicultural education heavily depends on teachers' initiative and competence in culturally responsive pedagogy. Without sufficient training or professional development, the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum may not be fully realized. Previous research by (Hasslen, 2008) found that many Indonesian teachers lacked adequate preparation to deliver multicultural content effectively, often due to limited exposure during their pre-service education.

This concern is echoed by (Irwan et al., 2022), who examined multicultural practices in West Java elementary schools and concluded that although teachers recognized the importance of diversity, their methods were largely surface-level and event-based (e.g., celebrating national costume day) rather than integrated into daily instruction. The findings from SDN 1 Sukorambi, however, suggest a more embedded approach where multicultural themes are incorporated into literacy, project-based learning, and school culture—indicating a shift toward deeper integration under the Merdeka Curriculum.

The success of SDN 1 Sukorambi in implementing the curriculum can also be attributed to the school leadership's proactive stance. The principal's support for multicultural events and openness to community involvement appears to be a key factor in promoting inclusive practices. This observation is consistent with (Salim & Aprison, 2024), who emphasized that transformational school leadership significantly influences the development of inclusive, student-centered environments. Effective leadership fosters collaboration among teachers, encourages innovation in pedagogy, and cultivates a school climate conducive to cultural inclusion.

Moreover, students at SDN 1 Sukorambi displayed heightened intercultural awareness and expressed appreciation for diversity, as evident in their responses during interviews. This suggests that the curriculum is not only affecting what students learn but also shaping how they perceive and relate to others. In line with Gorski and (Chotimah, 2018) advocacy for critical multicultural education, the findings show potential for fostering critical consciousness and social responsibility at the primary school level. Although primary students are still developing cognitively, their capacity to understand fairness, respect, and difference can be cultivated through developmentally appropriate multicultural education.

The case study also highlights the importance of localized curriculum design, where schools are given autonomy to integrate local wisdom and cultural narratives into their teaching. This bottom-up approach, as supported by (Ross, 2021), allows educational content to reflect the lived realities of students and communities, making learning more meaningful. Their research in Bali revealed that when schools embed Balinese cultural values into curriculum and activities, students show stronger identity formation and civic behavior. Likewise, SDN 1 Sukorambi's inclusion of Madurese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese cultural elements serves to validate the multicultural identities of students in the classroom.

Why the Practice Works: The Interaction of Enabling Mechanisms

Beyond comparing these findings with previous studies, the more consequential analytical question is why multicultural education took root at SDN 1 Sukorambi when comparable schools report only surface-level practice. The evidence points not to any single factor but to the interaction of three mechanisms. The first is curricular flexibility, which operates as a permission structure: because the Merdeka Curriculum specifies learning outcomes rather than prescribing content, teachers possessed the discretionary space to replace generic texts with folk narratives drawn from the ethnic backgrounds actually present in the classroom. Flexibility, however, is only a necessary condition; it authorises multicultural content without generating it. The second mechanism is the structured experiential platform of the P5 project. The theme “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” converted an abstract value into a task with a deadline, a product, and an audience, thereby moving cultural difference out of the register of discourse and into shared activity—cooking, dancing, exhibiting, and explaining. It is this obligation to act together, rather than exposure to cultural information as such, that best accounts for the affective responses observed, such as one student's wish to visit Bali or another's recognition of a Madurese hero. Read through Banks' (2019) framework, the two mechanisms are complementary: content integration supplies the material, while equity pedagogy supplies the interactional form, and neither alone would be sufficient to produce prejudice reduction. The third mechanism is legitimation by school leadership. The principal's endorsement transformed multicultural work from a private pedagogical preference, which individual teachers must defend against competing demands on instructional time, into an institutional expectation backed by scheduling, budget, and the use of school space. This is what an empowering school culture (Banks, 2019) means in operational terms, and it explains why the practice observed here became embedded rather than episodic, in contrast to the event-based pattern reported by Irwan et al. (2022).

Theoretically, the case therefore suggests that content integration and school culture are mutually constitutive rather than separate dimensions, and that culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018) can be enacted at the primary level when curricular policy and institutional culture are aligned. In this sense, curricular reform functions as a structural enabler of multicultural education rather than merely as its backdrop.

Limitations of the Observed Practice

A critical reading must also register what this practice does not achieve. First, the multicultural learning documented here remains largely cultural-expressive: it works with food, dress, dance, greetings, and folklore—the visible surface of culture—while questions of structural inequality, discrimination, and privilege, which Banks (2019) situates at the levels of knowledge construction and prejudice reduction, did not appear in any lesson observed. The curriculum, as enacted here, produces appreciation of diversity more readily than critical consciousness about it. Second, the practice is person-dependent: it rests on the initiative of particular teachers and one supportive principal, and none of the mechanisms described above is protected by written school policy, a documented module, or an induction procedure for incoming staff, which leaves it vulnerable to teacher rotation and leadership succession. Third, the evidence of outcomes is self-reported and short-term; increased tolerance is inferred from what students and parents said shortly after a project, and the study cannot establish whether these dispositions persist over time or transfer to situations of genuine intergroup tension. Fourth, P5 is episodic by design, concentrating multicultural engagement within a project period, which risks reproducing in a more sophisticated form the very event-based logic that the school otherwise transcends in its daily literacy instruction. Finally, the informants were those willing to participate; teachers who may find P5 burdensome and parents unconvinced by cultural projects are largely absent from the data, and their absence should be read as a limitation of the account rather than as evidence of consensus.

Conditions That Constrain Replication

Nevertheless, scalability remains a challenge. While SDN 1 Sukorambi has demonstrated successful practices, it remains a singular case. Broader studies are required to determine how representative this experience is across other public schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Moreover, policies need to ensure that such practices are not confined to a few innovative schools but are systematically supported through teacher training, curriculum development resources, and monitoring mechanisms.

These limitations indicate, in turn, the conditions under which the practice would be difficult to reproduce elsewhere; the case is not simply successful but conditionally successful, and the conditions are demanding. First, it presupposes a genuinely plural school population: at SDN 1 Sukorambi, Madurese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese identities were present among the students themselves, so that cultural difference was already a resource inside the classroom. In a culturally homogeneous school, the same P5 theme would have to be taught about distant others and would lose precisely the identity-validating quality that made it effective here. Second, it presupposes teacher capacity in culturally responsive pedagogy which, as Hasslen (2008) notes, pre-service education does not reliably provide; flexibility handed to an unprepared teacher is likely to yield not localised content but a default return to the textbook. Third, it presupposes leadership continuity and discretion: where principals are evaluated chiefly on literacy and numeracy results, the same discretionary space will predictably be spent elsewhere. Fourth, it presupposes community availability, since parental participation of the kind observed assumes families with the time, confidence, and cultural capital to enter the classroom, an assumption that does not hold across all socio-economic settings. Fifth, it presupposes a degree of institutional slack—time, space, and modest funding for exhibitions—that schools facing staff shortages or double-shift schedules do not possess. The appropriate inference for policy, therefore, is not that the Merdeka Curriculum will produce multicultural education wherever it is adopted, but that it removes a structural obstacle; whether the resulting space is used depends on capacities that policy must deliberately build through teacher training, leadership preparation, and school-level resourcing. The present findings should accordingly be read as an account of what becomes possible under favourable conditions rather than as a description of what typically occurs.

In summary, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN 1 Sukorambi Jember has provided valuable insights into how national curricular reforms can support multicultural education. The curriculum's flexibility allows for the meaningful integration of diverse cultural narratives, while project-based learning fosters hands-on, empathetic engagement with multicultural values. Teacher agency, school leadership, and community involvement all contribute to this success. When aligned with research-based strategies and supported by adequate infrastructure, the Merdeka Curriculum holds promise in nurturing inclusive, culturally competent citizens from an early age.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Merdeka Curriculum provides a flexible and inclusive framework that effectively supports multicultural education at the primary school level. Through contextualized teaching materials, culturally responsive pedagogy, and project-based learning such as the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), students are encouraged to appreciate cultural diversity and develop intercultural understanding. The success of such implementation depends on the initiative of teachers, supportive school leadership, and active community involvement. Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum shows strong potential as a transformative tool for fostering social harmony and multicultural awareness in Indonesian elementary education

Nevertheless, these conclusions should be read in light of the study's limitations. As a single-case qualitative study conducted at one elementary school, the findings are context-bound and are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The reliance on interviews, observations, and documents from a limited number of informants also means that the results reflect the particular conditions—especially the supportive leadership and teacher agency—present at SDN 1 Sukorambi. Future research is therefore recommended to employ multi-site or comparative designs involving several schools across different regions and socio-cultural settings, and to incorporate longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to assess the sustained impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on students' multicultural competence. Such studies would strengthen the transferability and practical value of the findings and provide a firmer basis for policy recommendations.

REFERENCES

- Anggraeni, D., Abkha, A. O., Syifa, A. W. R., Lighoyati, S. K., Millatina, T. T., & Mufiatun, N. D. A. (2023). Praktik Moderasi Beragama dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam pada Masyarakat Multikultural di Bali. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education and Local Culture (IJIELC)*, 1(2), 125–136.
- Azizatul 'uula, L., Surachmi, S., & Utaminingsih, S. (2022). Nilai-Nilai Kearifan Lokal Dalam Pendidikan Multikultural di SDN Tambakromo 01. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 8(18), 262–268. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7134334>.
- Banks, J. A. (2019). *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (6th ed.). Pearson.

- Chotimah, U. (2018). Pengintegrasian Nilai-Nilai Kearifan Lokal Dalam Pendidikan Multikultural. *Jurnal Civics : Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan* 15(1), 19–25.
- Firman Aulia Ramadhan, N. H. (2022). COMMUNICATION OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS OF STUDENTS IN OPTIMIZING LEARNING DURING THE PANDEMIC ERA AT MIN 6 JEMBRANA BALI. *Al-Aulad: Journal of Islamic Primary Education*, 5(2), 89–101.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Hasslen, R. (2008). From a Tarpaper Shack to a Transformed Classroom: A Teacher's Journey. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 44(2), 52–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2008.10516493>
- Idris, H., & Adawiyah, R. (2023). December 2023 Pandemic: Case of Multicultural Students in Indonesia. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 23(2), 217–229.
- Irwan, I., Kamarudin, K., & Mansur, M. (2022). Membangun Kebhinekaan Antar Remaja dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Multikulturalisme. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 6(2), 2301–2311.
<https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v6i2.2173>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>
- Lasmawan, I. W., Suastika, I. N., Sanjaya, D. B., & Pardi, I. W. (2024). Potensi Pengembangan Model Pendidikan Multikultural berbasis Budaya Balichinesia melalui Pendekatan Eduwisata di Bali. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora* 13(3), 695–704.
- Munardji, Kholis, N., & Mufidah, N. (2020). Community multicultural integration pattern in environment-based learning. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(1), 101–124.
<https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.1317a>
- Osso, C. D. (2008). *Meeting Diversity With a Multicultural English Elective Course*. (Master's thesis, Dominican University of California). ERIC.
- Pageh, I. M. (2021). Multikulturalisme Dan Tantangannya Di Indonesia: Jejak Kesetaraan Etnis Dan Kultur Di Pura Republik/ Gambur Angalayang Kubutambahan Bali. *Sosio-Didaktika: Social Science Education Journal*, 3(2), 115–125.
<https://doi.org/10.15408/sd.v3i2.4344>

- Ramadhan, F. A., & Usriyah, L. (2021). Strategi Guru dalam Mengimplementasikan Pendidikan Multikultural pada Sekolah Dasar Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19. *AKSELERASI: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru MI*, 2(2), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.35719/akselerasi.v2i2.114>
- Riyanti, A., & Novitasari, N. (2021). Pendidikan Multikultural Berbasis Kearifan Lokal Bagi Siswa Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Adat Dan Budaya Indonesia*, 3(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jabi.v3i1.37780>
- Ross, L. S. (2021). Equitably Responsive Teaching. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 57(2), 55–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2021.1890437>
- Salim, A., & Aprison, W. (2024). Pendidikan Multikultural Berbasis Kearifan Lokal. *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Pendidikan Indonesia*, 3(1), 22–30. <https://jpion.org/index.php/jpi>
- Sugiyono. (2013). *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan (Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D)*. Alfabeta.
- Wakano, A. (2019). Nilai-nilai Pendidikan Multikultural dalam Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Maluku. *Al-Iltizam: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 4(2), 26–43. <https://doi.org/10.33477/alt.v4i2.1006>
- Widiantari, N. N., Gading, I. K., & Astawan, I. G. (2021). Bahan Ajar Interaktif Berbasis Kearifan Lokal Bali Tema Indahnya Kebersamaan. *Jurnal Pendidikan Multikultural Indonesia*, 4(1), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jpmu.v4i1.34796>
- Winaja, I. W., Prabawa, I. W. S. W., & Pertiwi, P. R. (2019). Acculturation and Its Effects on the Religious and Ethnic Values of Bali's Catur Village Community I Wayan Winaja 1, I Wayan Sukma Winarya Prabawa 2, & Putu Ratih Pertiwi 3. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 10(3), 249–275.
- Zakiah, L., Sarkadi, Marini, A., Komarudin, Casmana, A. R., & Kusmawati, A. P. (2023). Implementation of Teaching Multicultural Values Through Civic Education for Elementary School Students. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 14(1), 110–142.