

Fostering Unity in Diversity: The Role of Multicultural Education in Early Childhood Preschool in Banda Aceh

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Abstract: Multicultural education is a program designed to teach students to appreciate differences in their surroundings, such as differences in ethnicity, religion, race, and language. Understanding multiculturalism is crucial for early childhood as it builds a strong social and emotional foundation, fostering tolerance, and mutual respect, and reducing the potential for conflict from an early age. Cultural diversity, when properly introduced, can nurture unity in diversity, which is essential in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. This study aims to explore the practice of introducing multicultural education at a preschool in Banda Aceh, focusing on how concepts of diversity are conveyed to young children. Multicultural education seeks to foster an understanding of the importance of respecting differences, including ethnicity, religion, race, and language. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with interviews as the data collection technique, the findings reveal that introducing multicultural values at an early age enhances children's awareness of cultural diversity and strengthens social bonds, aligning with the principle of Unity in Diversity (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika).

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Multiculturalism is something that is very embedded in social life. Multicultural itself means the existence of cultural diversity, but more broadly culture can be seen from various aspects, such as: nation, religion, ethnicity, race, language, and others (Suryana et al., 2015). Indonesia is a highly multicultural country, as we know that Indonesia consists of thousands of islands whose people have their own cultural characteristics. Culture is an important capital for the progress of a nation. Where we know that the progress of a nation is currently developing rapidly following the current era of globalization. The multicultural existence of society will have a positive impact if implemented well, such as tolerance and respect for each other. However, on the contrary, if differences are highlighted then what emerges is separatism and the destruction of the nation itself. There are many examples of cases that occur due to

a lack of tolerance in society, which has a negative impact on society itself.

Cultural diversity and religious diversity influence social coexistence in societies all over the world. People with different cultural and religious backgrounds and diverse histories of socialization live together in various contexts and share their individual religious and cultural concepts with their community (Knoblauch, 2023). Indonesia is an archipelagic country that has various races, ethnicities, religions, languages and cultural variations. In the world of PAUD, it does not rule out the possibility of multiculturalism. In one school there may be children who come from various regions, races, ethnicities, religions, etc. and different languages. The role of the school is to provide the best possible service so that every child with a different cultural background can be treated equally (Suyanto, 2005).

Multiculturalism education is a process of getting used to providing guidance and conditioning for children to have the mentality or characteristics of being accustomed to living amidst very complex differences, starting from ideological, social and economic and religious differences, with education which is thought to be able to change children because it is a product of various families, health and different social and economic conditions in the middle the crush of globalization. The multicultural education pattern will also provide teaching that aims to understand its meaning differences and togetherness as well as differences in ethnicity and religion, can provide tolerance towards all individuals, providing opportunities for others to participate in it exercise their rights and become citizens who always uphold the values of justice and civility. So multicultural education is expected only at the conceptual level but also carried out at the level practical (Hasanah, 2018). Multicultural education has become a critical component of early childhood development in today's globalized world. It aims to promote inclusivity, respect for diversity, and cultural awareness among young learners. Scholars argue that introducing multicultural education at an early age lays the foundation for fostering mutual respect and understanding among children from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2017) this concept is particularly significant in Banda Aceh, a region rich in cultural diversity due to its historical and social context.

Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh Province, is known for its unique cultural and religious diversity. Despite being predominantly Muslim, the region has experienced a blending of cultural influences from both local ethnic groups and foreign settlers throughout its history (Hackett, 2022). This makes the region a compelling case for examining the role of multicultural education in fostering unity. Early childhood education, as the starting point for social and emotional development, provides a critical platform for implementing multicultural practices. Early childhood education is widely recognized as a crucial stage in a child's development. The period

between the ages of 0 and 6 years is characterized by rapid cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Schmutz, 2024). Within this context, introducing multicultural education at the preschool level can significantly influence a child's understanding of diversity, promoting inclusivity and empathy from an early age. In Banda Aceh, where children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds interact, the need for multicultural education becomes even more pressing. Studies show that early exposure to diverse cultural narratives and practices encourages children to appreciate differences and reduces the likelihood of prejudice in the future (Esquivel et al., 2023). Therefore, incorporating multicultural elements in preschool curricula in Banda Aceh is essential for fostering unity and peaceful coexistence. Despite the recognized importance of multicultural education, several challenges hinder its effective implementation in early childhood settings. These include limited teacher training on multicultural pedagogy, lack of resources, and resistance from certain sections of the community due to religious or cultural sensitivities. In Banda Aceh, educators must navigate these challenges carefully while maintaining the balance between cultural sensitivity and the promotion of diversity. To foster unity in diversity, both national and local governments must provide adequate support, resources, and training to early childhood educators. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping children's attitudes toward diversity. In Banda Aceh, teachers must be well-versed in multicultural pedagogy to create an inclusive learning environment. Research suggests that when teachers model respect for different cultures and facilitate discussions about diversity, children are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward their peers from different backgrounds (Abacioglu et al., 2020). Therefore, continuous professional development for preschool teachers is essential.

A previous and related study by (Muzyka, 2024) revealed multicultural education in early childhood fosters unity by promoting cultural competence, inclusivity, and understanding, enabling educators to effectively support diverse student populations and create supportive learning

environments. The purpose of this study is to address several key objectives related to the preparation of early childhood educators in the context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the United States. The review of literature that follows will encompass various aspects of cultural competence and the preparation of educators. This study aims to explore the practice of introducing multicultural education at a preschool in Banda Aceh, focusing on how concepts of diversity are conveyed to young children.

Materials and Methods

Study area

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at exploring and analyzing the perspectives and experiences of a teacher and a principal regarding the role of multicultural education in fostering unity in diversity among young children at Fatih Kindergarten, Banda Aceh. A case study design is used to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of multicultural education's role in a specific context, namely, Fatih Kindergarten. The case study focuses on observing the implementation of multicultural values carried out by the teacher and principal. The main participants in this study are: A teacher who implements the multicultural education program at Teuku Nyak Arif Fatih Bilingual School, and the principal who is responsible for the planning and supervision of the program. The study is conducted at Teuku Nyak Arif Fatih Bilingual School, located in Banda Aceh. This location was selected due to the active application of multicultural education in the preschool's daily activities. The following data collection methods are used in this study: interview and documentation. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with the teacher and principal to gather information on their perceptions and understanding of multicultural education. The strategies and approaches used to teach multicultural values to children. Challenges and solutions encountered in implementing multicultural education in the preschool setting, and the impact of the multicultural education program on children's social interactions and

attitudes toward tolerance. Documentation is supporting documents, such as the curriculum, lesson plans, and school activities that contain multicultural elements, are collected and analyzed. The data obtained are analyzed using thematic analysis, such data reduction, data interpretation and conclusion.

Results and Discussion

The interviews with the teacher and the principal of *Teuku Nyak Arif Fatih* kindergarten in Banda Aceh reveal a shared commitment to fostering multicultural values in early childhood education. The school and its staff view multicultural education as crucial in shaping an inclusive environment that promotes tolerance and respect for diversity. The principal emphasizes that the school has established policies aimed at building an inclusive atmosphere, which is supported by a curriculum that incorporates multicultural values such as respect, tolerance, and cooperation among children of diverse cultural backgrounds. Through these policies, the school intends to instil an appreciation for diversity from an early age. The teacher echoes this approach, defining multicultural education as "education that does not distinguish between culture, religion, ethnicity, and race," and stresses the importance of children learning to coexist and interact positively with those from different backgrounds. One of the main strategies employed by the school to support multicultural education is the inclusion of diverse cultural celebrations and the provision of learning materials that reflect various cultural perspectives. This is a practical way for the children to observe and participate in traditions different from their own, enhancing their understanding of cultural diversity. The teacher builds on this by introducing children to these concepts in an age-appropriate manner, using the presence of classmates from various cultural backgrounds to explain the importance of respecting and valuing differences. By acknowledging the diversity present in the classroom, the teacher helps students realize that "we live not only with people who share the same culture but with many cultures in the world," a

lesson that encourages open-mindedness and mutual respect among students.

The school's commitment to multicultural education extends to teacher support through training and workshops. The principal noted that these workshops focus on methods for effectively introducing and teaching diverse cultural concepts to young children, providing teachers with techniques to create a respectful classroom environment. The teacher benefits from this professional development, as it equips them with strategies for handling challenges such as conflicts that may arise due to cultural misunderstandings. For instance, when students from different cultural backgrounds engage in physical play that might lead to conflict, the teacher implements a point system to encourage positive behaviour, stating, "this is a repeated problem, so i took the initiative to reward children who manage to play kindly without touching or hurting their friends." This system reflects an adaptive approach that aligns with the school's commitment to fostering inclusivity. The teacher's observations indicate that children respond enthusiastically to learning about different cultures, showing a willingness to embrace new traditions and share aspects of their own cultural heritage. The teacher shares that "the children enjoy introducing foods from other countries and love telling their foreign friends about traditional Indonesian games," suggesting that students are not only learning about other cultures but are also becoming cultural ambassadors themselves. The principal sees this as a positive outcome of the school's multicultural policies, noting that in the long term, multicultural education aims to nurture a generation that is tolerant, open-minded, and appreciative of diversity. This approach is expected to provide children with essential social skills that will help them navigate a pluralistic society, fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and strengthening their ability to adapt to diverse environments.

A challenge, however, lies in aligning parental expectations with the school's multicultural approach, particularly when cultural differences affect behavioural expectations. According to the teacher, some parents of local students may be upset when their child encounters rough physical

play, while foreign parents tend to see it as "just a part of childhood," viewing such interactions as normal. This divergence in parental perspectives highlights the need for consistent communication between the school and families to ensure that multicultural values are understood and supported outside the classroom. By working closely with parents, the school hopes to create a cohesive approach to multicultural education that extends beyond the classroom. In summary, the findings from both interviews suggest that the school's approach to multicultural education has a positive impact on children's social and emotional development. The principal's policies and the teacher's daily practices together contribute to an environment that values diversity and encourages positive interaction across cultural lines. Both the school and the teacher recognize that these efforts require ongoing reinforcement and proactive strategies to address challenges, particularly in guiding children towards respectful interactions and managing parental expectations. This combined approach reflects a commitment to cultivating an inclusive, respectful, and empathetic generation capable of thriving in a multicultural society.

Multicultural education plays a significant role in shaping the social-emotional development of young children by fostering empathy, respect, and social skills necessary for navigating a diverse world. In the context of Fatih Bilingual School, the introduction of multicultural practices has created opportunities for children to interact with peers from varied cultural backgrounds. These interactions naturally cultivate skills such as understanding, patience, and cooperation, which are essential components of social-emotional learning. By engaging in activities that celebrate diversity, children develop an appreciation for cultural differences, enhancing their emotional intelligence and ability to form meaningful relationships. Moreover, the role of teachers in addressing conflicts and promoting positive interactions is crucial in linking multicultural education to social-emotional development. At Fatih Bilingual School, teachers employ strategies such as explaining the importance of mutual respect and discouraging discriminatory behavior.

These efforts not only resolve immediate conflicts but also instill a sense of fairness and compassion in children. For instance, when addressing physical altercations among children, teachers emphasize non-violent communication and reward positive behavior, reinforcing the value of empathy and self-regulation. Lastly, the structured support from the school administration further strengthens this connection by ensuring that multicultural values are consistently practiced and supported. Policies promoting inclusivity and periodic teacher training ensure that educators are equipped to handle the dynamics of a multicultural classroom. These systemic efforts create a nurturing environment where children feel valued and respected, regardless of their cultural background. Such an environment is conducive to developing self-confidence, emotional stability, and a broader worldview in children, laying the foundation for them to thrive in a diverse society.

The findings of this study align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive and emotional development. Multicultural education, as implemented at Fatih Bilingual School, provides a platform for children to engage in social interactions that expose them to diverse perspectives and cultural norms, fostering both their social and emotional growth. Research by (Roeslan, 2022) supports this, highlighting that inclusive learning environments enhance children's ability to understand and regulate their emotions while building empathy and social competence. Furthermore, (Banks, 2008) underscores that multicultural education promotes social justice and equity, creating opportunities for children to develop a sense of belonging and respect for others. These theoretical perspectives validate the role of multicultural practices in early childhood education as a means to support holistic development, particularly in a diverse and interconnected world. Multicultural education involves developing inclusive practices that recognize and respect cultural diversity, ultimately aiming to empower all students to thrive in a diverse society. Fatih kindergarten's curriculum, which integrates multicultural values through celebrations and culturally inclusive materials, exemplifies this approach. By teaching children to

respect differences and avoid stereotypes, the school adheres to banks' model of promoting equity and social justice. Furthermore, the efforts to create a learning environment that accommodates cultural differences support (Nieto, 2001) emphasis on fostering intercultural understanding and preparing students to be global citizens from a young age.

Studies suggest that incorporating multicultural education in early childhood positively affects social-emotional development, enhancing empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills. For instance, (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020) found that when young children engage with diverse cultural narratives, they develop an increased capacity for empathy and an understanding of multiple perspectives. This is observed in Teuku Nyak Fatih kindergarten students, who reportedly enjoy learning about different cultures and sharing their own cultural practices with peers. Such exchanges can reduce the development of biases and stereotypes, as emphasized by (Boutte, 2022) who highlights that early exposure to multicultural learning can counteract prejudice and foster an appreciation for diversity. Fatih kindergarten's policies and practices, therefore, align well with research-backed strategies that promote inclusivity and respect from an early age. The teacher's use of structured behavioral reinforcement, such as the point system to manage physical conflicts, reflects findings by (Abrams & Moio, 2009) who argue that setting clear, positive expectations in multicultural classrooms can effectively support diverse behavioral norms. Since young children often internalize acceptable behavior through reward systems, fatih kindergarten's approach encourages respectful interactions despite cultural differences in physical play. Such interventions not only help maintain harmony but also illustrate (Gay, 2018) view that culturally responsive discipline can bridge understanding among children from different backgrounds. By actively guiding children to interact respectfully, teachers facilitate a classroom climate that values diversity and inclusivity, aligning with strategies shown to foster harmonious multicultural classrooms.

Finally, the challenges in parental alignment observed at *Teuku Nyak Arif Fatih Kindergarten*

echo findings by (Lynch & Prins, 2021) who highlight the critical role of family involvement in reinforcing multicultural education. Discrepancies in parental expectations, especially regarding behavioural norms, can hinder the continuity of multicultural values from school to home. Effective communication with families, as the school attempts to maintain, is crucial for aligning home and school values. The importance of parental involvement is also highlighted by (Yoon et al., 2023) who emphasize that family engagement strengthens multicultural education initiatives, as children are more likely to internalize these values when reinforced across settings. Consequently, fatih kindergarten's ongoing efforts to address parental concerns underscore a holistic approach that engages both school and family in fostering a multicultural perspective.

Conclusions

This study highlights the pivotal role of multicultural education in early childhood settings in fostering inclusivity, respect, and tolerance among young learners. Through diverse classroom practices, such as introducing various cultural traditions and addressing cultural differences constructively, children are encouraged to appreciate diversity and build harmonious relationships. These efforts positively impact their social-emotional development, equipping them with the skills to navigate multicultural environments and promoting a sense of mutual respect from an early age. Additionally, the research underscores the importance of institutional support, including school policies and teacher training, in implementing multicultural education effectively. Collaboration between teachers and administrators ensures that the values of multiculturalism are integrated seamlessly into both classroom and institutional frameworks. The study concludes that a structured approach to multicultural education not only enriches children's interpersonal skills but also contributes to the development of empathetic, inclusive individuals who are prepared to thrive in diverse social settings.

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