



Multicultural Education and Social Inclusion Practices in Public Schools: A Study of Diverse Communities in Jeneponto Regency

Muhammad Agung¹

¹Universitas Negeri Makassar

*Corresponding Author: Muhammad Agung

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion practices in public schools within diverse communities in Jeneponto Regency, Indonesia. The increasing social and cultural diversity in educational settings requires schools to develop inclusive learning environments that promote tolerance, equality, and respect for differences. This research aims to analyze how multicultural education is implemented, explore social inclusion practices within school life, and identify the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing their implementation. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving principals, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that multicultural education has been integrated into classroom instruction, character education programs, and school culture through the promotion of tolerance, cooperation, and respect for diversity. Social inclusion practices are reflected in equal opportunities for students to participate in academic and non-academic activities regardless of their social, economic, or cultural backgrounds. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering inclusive classrooms, while school leadership contributes significantly by developing policies and programs that support equality and participation. The implementation of multicultural education is supported by inclusive leadership, teacher commitment, local cultural values emphasizing solidarity, and community support. However, challenges remain, including limited teacher training, socioeconomic disparities among students, and the influence of external social stereotypes. The study concludes that multicultural education and social inclusion are mutually reinforcing processes that contribute to the development of an inclusive school environment and strengthen social cohesion among students in diverse communities.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental instrument in building an inclusive, democratic, and civilized society. Amidst increasing social mobility, globalization, and the diversity of identities in modern society, schools no longer function merely as a place for transferring knowledge, but also as a social space that shapes students' values, attitudes, and character (Sukiyat, 2020). One of the main challenges facing the current education system is how to manage diversity constructively so that it can become a source of social strength, rather than a trigger for conflict and discrimination (Desivilya Syna, 2025). In this context, multicultural education is an increasingly relevant approach to building awareness of diversity and encouraging social inclusion in educational environments (Wulandari, 2020).

Multicultural education is an educational approach that aims to recognize, appreciate, and integrate diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and social background into the learning process (Alismail, 2016). Multicultural education focuses not only on the representation of diverse cultures in the curriculum but also strives to create equal learning opportunities for all students (Rosada & Albertus, 2019). This approach helps students understand differences as part of social reality that must be respected and valued. Thus, multicultural education plays a crucial role in shaping a generation that is tolerant, open, and able to coexist in a pluralistic society (Lonhor & Ambon, 2020).

As global society evolves, the issue of social inclusion has also become a major concern in education policies in various countries. Social inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that every individual has equal opportunities to participate fully in social, economic, cultural, and political life without experiencing discrimination or marginalization (Ra'is, 2018). In the context of education, social inclusion relates not only to access to educational services but also to the active involvement of all students in school activities, regardless of their background. Inclusive schools strive to create a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment for all students, so that each individual feels valued and accepted as part of the school community (David Wijaya, 2019).

Various studies have shown that multicultural education is closely linked to strengthening social inclusion. Education that values diversity can reduce prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination, which often lead to social exclusion in schools (Keenan et al., 2016). Furthermore, the application of multicultural values can increase positive interactions between students from diverse backgrounds and strengthen social cohesion within the educational community (Yani et al., 2020). Therefore, multicultural education serves not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as an instrument of social transformation that contributes to the development of a more just and inclusive society (Torres & Tarozzi, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, multicultural education is highly relevant, given that Indonesia is a country with a highly complex level of diversity. This diversity encompasses more than 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, various religions and beliefs, and diverse socioeconomic conditions (Munawar, 2019). This diversity is a national treasure that must be managed through an education system capable of instilling the values of tolerance, respect for differences, and unity in diversity (Wardhani, 2018). This principle also aligns with the national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which emphasizes the importance of unity amidst diversity (Nafi'ah, 2020).

The Indonesian government has integrated multicultural values and social inclusion into various education policies, including through strengthening character education, implementing the Independent Curriculum (*Curriculum Merdeka*), and religious moderation programs in schools (Maulana & Malang, 2020). These policies emphasize the importance of learning that respects diversity, encourages the active participation of all students, and builds an inclusive school culture. However, the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion at the school level still faces various challenges, such as limited teacher capacity, a lack of understanding of diversity, and the influence of prevailing social stereotypes (Tonbuloglu et al., 2016).

Several previous studies have shown that the success of multicultural education is significantly influenced by school culture, educational leadership, and the teaching

practices implemented by teachers. Schools that actively integrate diversity values into their curriculum and activities tend to have higher levels of tolerance and social cohesion than schools that pay less attention to these aspects (Kurniawan, 2018). Furthermore, teachers play a strategic role as agents of change in building an inclusive learning environment that values diversity (Macdonald et al., 2019). Therefore, studies of multicultural education practices need to be conducted contextually to understand how these values are implemented in daily school life.

Jeneponto Regency is a region in South Sulawesi Province with unique social and cultural characteristics. Although dominated by certain ethnic groups, social development, population mobility, and interactions between communities have created increasingly complex dynamics of diversity. Public schools in this region serve as a meeting place for students from diverse social, economic, cultural, and life experiences (Munadlir, 2016). These conditions make schools a crucial arena for fostering attitudes of tolerance, respect for diversity, and social inclusion among the younger generation.

However, to date, there has been limited research specifically examining how multicultural education and social inclusion practices are implemented in public schools within the diverse community context of Jeneponto Regency. Most previous research has focused on academic aspects, educational management, or general curriculum implementation, resulting in relatively limited understanding of diversity and social inclusion practices at the school level. Yet, a deeper understanding of these practices is crucial to supporting the development of education policies that are more responsive to the needs of a diverse society.

Social changes resulting from developments in information technology, social media, and globalization also present new challenges in building an inclusive school culture. Exposure to diverse information and perspectives can enrich students' horizons, but at the same time, it also has the potential to give rise to prejudice, intolerance, and social polarization if not balanced with adequate education (Hughes, 2016). Therefore, schools need to play a more active role in instilling multicultural values and creating interactive spaces that respect diversity.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze the practices of multicultural education and social inclusion in public schools within diverse communities in Jeneponto Regency. This study seeks to identify the implementation of multicultural education, explore the practices of social inclusion that are developing in the school environment, and analyze the factors that support and hinder its implementation. The results are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of studies on multicultural education and social inclusion, as well as serve as the basis for recommendations for schools and policymakers in creating educational environments that are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diversity of Indonesian society.

Methods

Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand in-depth the practices of multicultural education and social inclusion that occur in public schools within the context of diverse communities in Jeneponto Regency. This approach allows researchers to explore experiences, perceptions, and social interactions that cannot be measured quantitatively.

Meanwhile, the case study design was used because the research focuses on specific phenomena occurring in real-life contexts, thus yielding a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion in schools.

Research Location and Timeline

The research was conducted in several public schools in Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province. The research locations were selected purposively, considering the characteristics of the schools, which have diverse student populations from various social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. These locations were chosen because they were considered capable of providing relevant information regarding multicultural education and social inclusion practices in a heterogeneous community context. The research was conducted during a data collection period that included preparation, field observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and data analysis.

Research Informants

Research informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their level of knowledge, experience, and involvement in the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion in schools. Primary informants consisted of school principals, teachers, and students who were directly involved in the learning process and school life. Supporting informants included parents, school supervisors, and community leaders who understood the social and educational conditions in the school's surrounding area. The informant selection process was carried out in stages until data saturation was reached, which is the point when the information obtained shows recurring patterns and no significant new information is found.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were used to elicit information about informants' experiences, views, and perceptions regarding the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion practices in schools. Interviews were conducted semi-structured, allowing researchers to obtain in-depth yet focused data in line with the research objectives.

Participatory observation was conducted to directly observe learning activities, social interactions between students, relationships between teachers and students, and various school activities that reflect multicultural values and social inclusion. Through observation, researchers were able to gain a more concrete understanding of practices taking place in the field.

In addition, documentation studies were conducted by reviewing various documents related to the research, such as the school's vision and mission, curriculum, school activity programs, school regulations, activity reports, and other relevant documents. Documentation was used as supporting data to strengthen the results of interviews and observations.

Research Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument, collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. To aid the data collection process, researchers used interview guides, observation sheets, a voice recorder, a camera, and field notes. These

instruments were used to ensure the data obtained aligns with the research focus and can be scientifically validated.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Analysis was conducted continuously from the beginning of data collection until the research was completed. The first stage was data condensation, which is the process of selecting, simplifying, grouping, and focusing data relevant to the research objectives. The second stage was data presentation through descriptive narratives, matrices, and categorization of emerging themes. The third stage was conclusion drawing and verification, which were carried out continuously to ensure that the research findings were supported by adequate empirical evidence. Through this process, key themes were identified regarding the implementation of multicultural education, social inclusion practices, supporting factors, and inhibiting factors in the school environment.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research results, source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking were used. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various groups of informants. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Meanwhile, member checking was conducted by asking informants to reconfirm the interview results and data interpretations conducted by the researcher. The use of these techniques aims to increase the level of trust in the research results.

Research Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics. Prior to data collection, all informants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives, benefits, and their rights as participants. Informant participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Confidentiality of informant identities was maintained using codes or pseudonyms in all research reports. All data obtained was used solely for academic purposes and will not be disseminated for other purposes without the consent of the relevant parties.

Results

Implementation of Multicultural Education in Schools

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of multicultural education in public schools in Jeneponto Regency has been carried out through various learning activities and school culture that emphasize the values of tolerance, respect for diversity, equality, and cooperation among students. Although the school does not have a specific course on multicultural education, these values are integrated into various subjects, particularly Pancasila Education, Religious Education, and the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). Teachers strive to instill in students the understanding that everyone has a different background and that these differences must be respected as part of social life.

Social Inclusion Practices in School Life

Research results indicate that social inclusion practices in public schools in Jeneponto Regency are realized through various efforts aimed at creating an open, fair learning environment that provides equal opportunities for all students. Social inclusion is not only understood as acceptance of diversity, but also as an active effort to ensure that every student can fully participate in all school activities without experiencing discrimination or exclusion. Schools strive to build a culture that values diversity through positive social interactions, student involvement in school activities, and providing equal access to various learning resources and opportunities for personal development.

In daily school life, social inclusion practices are evident in the harmonious relationships between students from different social and economic backgrounds and academic abilities. There is no segregation of groups based on social status or family economic conditions. Students interact openly in learning activities, play, school organizations, and extracurricular activities. Teachers and school administrators actively encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and avoid any form of discrimination that could hinder student participation in the school environment.

Based on observations, the school provides equal opportunities for all students to participate in organizational activities, competitions, student leadership, and various character development programs. Student organization officials are selected based on ability and interest, regardless of socioeconomic background. This policy provides space for all students to develop their potential and gain equal experience in school life.

The principal explained that the principle of equality is the main foundation of school management, ensuring that every student has the same right to participate in all educational activities. He stated:

"We strive to ensure that no student feels discriminated against. All students have equal opportunities to participate in school activities, both academic and non-academic. What we look for is their potential and desire to develop."

Teachers also play a crucial role in building social inclusion through participatory and collaborative classroom management. During the learning process, teachers provide opportunities for all students to express their opinions, ask questions, and contribute to class discussions. Teachers strive to create a safe atmosphere so that students feel valued and are not afraid to express their views. One teacher explained:

"We always try to involve all students in learning. If there are students who tend to be quiet or lack confidence, we provide support so they can participate like their peers."

The practice of social inclusion is also reflected in the relationships between students, which demonstrate a high level of solidarity. Students help each other in learning activities, share information, and support friends experiencing academic or social difficulties. These interactions create a strong sense of community and strengthen social bonds within the school environment.

One student stated:

"If a friend is having trouble understanding a lesson, we usually help explain it. In our class, no one feels superior to another because everyone supports each other."

Research findings also indicate that extracurricular activities are an important means of strengthening social inclusion. Through sports, arts, scouting, and student organizations, students can interact with friends from diverse backgrounds, thereby expanding their social networks. These activities help reduce social distance and strengthen a sense of camaraderie among students.

An extracurricular activity instructor explained:

"When students participate in activities together outside of class, they learn to work together and appreciate each other's abilities. This fosters a sense of togetherness that makes it easier for them to accept differences."

Despite this, interview results indicate that several challenges remain in achieving optimal social inclusion, particularly related to differences in family economic conditions and the influence of stereotypes originating from the environment outside the school. However, schools strive to address these challenges through character development, persuasive approaches to students, and strengthening the values of togetherness in various school activities.

The Role of Teachers in Building a Multicultural and Inclusive Environment

Research results indicate that teachers play a very strategic role in building a multicultural and inclusive school environment. As the primary actors in the educational process, teachers function not only as transmitters of learning materials but also as facilitators, mediators, role models, and character builders for students. In the context of multicultural education, teachers play a crucial role in instilling values of tolerance, respect for diversity, equality, and social justice in students through various learning activities and daily interactions within the school environment. This role is crucial because students come from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, and with diverse abilities, requiring a learning approach that accommodates these differences fairly and proportionally.

Based on interviews, teachers recognize that diversity is a reality that must be managed positively in the educational environment. Therefore, they strive to create an open classroom atmosphere and provide equal opportunities for all students to participate in the learning process. Teachers avoid discriminatory treatment and encourage students to respect differences in opinion, character, and background. Through this approach, teachers strive to build mutual trust and foster harmonious social relationships among students.

One teacher explained:

"In class, we try to treat all students equally, regardless of their family background, academic ability, or economic situation. The most important thing is that each student feels valued and has an equal opportunity to develop."

In addition to creating an inclusive learning environment, teachers also implement various collaborative learning strategies to strengthen social interactions among students. Forming heterogeneous study groups is one method often used to encourage students to work together with peers with different characteristics. Through these activities, students learn to appreciate differences, build empathy, and develop the communication and cooperation skills necessary for social life.

Another teacher explained:

"We often organize random study groups so students get used to interacting with different peers. From these activities, they learn that everyone has strengths and weaknesses that can complement each other."

Teachers also act as mediators in resolving social conflicts that may arise among students. When disputes or misunderstandings arise, teachers attempt to resolve them through dialogue, persuasive approaches, and character building. This approach aims to help students understand the importance of tolerance, self-control, and peaceful problem-solving. In this way, teachers not only resolve conflicts but also teach social skills that are essential for students' future lives.

Observations show that teachers consistently model behavior that respects differences in daily school life. Teachers' attitudes in communicating with students, colleagues, and other school members serve as learning models that indirectly influence student behavior. This role model helps instill multicultural values more effectively because students not only hear theoretical explanations but also see the application of these values in real-world practice. One principal explained:

"Teachers are the primary role models for students. If teachers demonstrate respect for others and are fair to all students, these values will be more easily imitated and implemented by students."

Furthermore, teachers also play a role in identifying and providing attention to students who are potentially marginalized or struggling to adapt to the school environment. Teachers strive to ensure that each student receives the necessary support to optimally participate in learning and social activities at school. Attention to students' individual needs is one concrete example of implementing the principles of social inclusion in daily educational practice.

One student shared her experience:

"Our teachers always pay attention to all students. If a student seems isolated or struggling to learn, the teacher usually talks to them and helps them feel more confident."

The research findings also show that teachers' success in building a multicultural and inclusive environment is supported by their ability to integrate diversity values into learning materials. Teachers not only convey curriculum content but also connect the material to students' social lives, making learning more relevant and meaningful. Through this process, students gain an understanding that diversity is a natural part of society that must be respected and protected.

The Role of School Leadership in Supporting Social Inclusion

The research findings indicate that school leadership plays a crucial role in supporting the implementation of social inclusion in the school environment. The principal serves as a policymaker, organizational director, and driver of a school culture that creates an open, equitable, and respectful educational environment. The school leadership's commitment to the values of equality and social inclusion is a key factor in determining how educational policies, programs, and practices are implemented by the entire school community. In the context of public schools in Jeneponto Regency, inclusive leadership is reflected in the principal's efforts to ensure that every student has equal opportunities to

learn, participate, and develop without discrimination based on social, economic, cultural, or academic background.

Interviews revealed that the principal actively promotes a school culture that emphasizes respect for diversity and the importance of togetherness. These values are embodied not only through formal policies but also through daily practices involving teachers, students, educational staff, and parents. The principal strives to build an environment conducive to the development of harmonious social relationships and ensures that all members of the school community feel accepted as part of the educational community.

One principal explained:

"We are committed to creating a welcoming school for all students. There should be no discrimination based on economic status, learning ability, or family background. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to develop."

School leadership also plays a role in formulating and implementing various programs that support social inclusion. These programs include character-building activities, fostering tolerance, joint social activities, and developing student organizations that involve all students equally. Through these programs, the school strives to create interactive spaces that enable students to learn to collaborate and appreciate diversity in their daily lives.

One teacher stated:

"The principal always reminds us that every student has equal rights. In every school activity, he emphasizes the importance of involving all students so that no one feels marginalized."

In addition to developing inclusive policies, the principal also acts as a facilitator, supporting teachers in developing learning practices that respect diversity. This support is provided through regular coordination, supervision of learning, and guidance on the importance of building an inclusive classroom environment. The principal encourages teachers to use participatory learning approaches and provides opportunities for all students to actively participate in the learning process.

Observations indicate that the principal consistently maintains open communication with teachers, students, and parents. This participatory communication approach helps create a democratic school climate and provides a space for various parties to express their aspirations and problems. Through effective communication, various issues that could potentially hinder social inclusion can be identified and resolved collaboratively.

One teacher said:

"The principal is very open to input from both teachers and students. If there are problems related to students' social relationships, they are usually immediately discussed together to find the best solution."

The role of school leadership is also evident in efforts to build collaboration with parents and the community. Principals recognize that the success of social inclusion is not solely determined by the school environment but also influenced by the family and community environment. Therefore, schools actively involve parents in various educational activities and collaborate with community leaders to support the strengthening of values of tolerance and togetherness.

One parent stated:

"The school frequently holds meetings with parents to discuss their children's development and school activities. We feel involved, which allows us to support programs aimed at building togetherness at school."

However, research shows that principals still face several challenges in optimally developing social inclusion, such as limited resources, differences in students' social backgrounds, and the influence of values developed outside the school environment. However, through adaptive and collaborative leadership, these challenges can be minimized by strengthening an inclusive school culture and increasing cooperation between the school and the community.

Supporting Factors in the Implementation of Multicultural Education and Social Inclusion

One key supporting factor is the principal's commitment to building a school culture that values diversity. Inclusive leadership encourages the creation of school policies and programs that provide equal opportunities for all students to participate in academic and non-academic activities. The principal actively directs teachers and education staff to implement the principle of equality and avoid all forms of discrimination in the school environment. A principal explained:

"We always emphasize that school should be a comfortable place for all students. Therefore, every program created must provide equal opportunities to all students, regardless of their background."

Another supporting factor is the role of teachers, who consistently integrate the values of tolerance, respect for diversity, and cooperation into the learning process. Teachers not only deliver subject matter but also instill social values that support an inclusive learning environment. The use of collaborative learning methods and group discussions helps students build positive relationships with peers from different backgrounds.

One teacher stated:

"We try to get students used to working together in diverse groups so they can learn to understand and appreciate the differences between them."

Furthermore, the local culture of the Jeneponto community, which upholds the values of cooperation, togetherness, and social solidarity, supports the implementation of multicultural education. These cultural values facilitate the school's ability to instill mutual respect and mutual assistance. Parental and community support is also crucial, creating harmony between the values taught at school and students' social lives within their families.

A community leader stated:

"The community here still upholds the value of togetherness. These values are also carried into school, so children are accustomed to living side by side and helping one another."

The existence of character education programs and extracurricular activities involving all students is also a significant supporting factor. Through these activities, students could interact directly with peers from different backgrounds, strengthening a sense of togetherness and reducing the potential for social exclusivity.

Factors Inhibiting the Implementation of Multicultural Education and Social Inclusion

Although the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion has been going quite well, research has identified several inhibiting factors that remain challenges for schools. One major obstacle is teachers' limited understanding and training regarding multicultural education and inclusive learning strategies. Some teachers still rely on personal experience in managing diversity because they have not received specific training that comprehensively addresses multicultural education.

One teacher explained:

"So far, we have learned more from experience in the field. Specific training on multicultural education or inclusive classroom management is still very limited."

Another obstacle is the socioeconomic disparity among students, which sometimes affects their social interaction patterns. Although schools strive to provide equal treatment to all students, differences in family economic conditions sometimes lead to feelings of inferiority or limited participation in certain activities.

One teacher explained:

"Sometimes there are students who lack self-confidence because their family's economic situation is different from that of their friends. This is a challenge for us to ensure that all students feel accepted and valued."

In addition to economic factors, the influence of stereotypes and values developed outside the school environment also hinders building a strong multicultural culture. Some students still carry certain views or habits acquired from their social environment, requiring an ongoing coaching process to instill values of tolerance and respect for diversity.

One principal explained: "Schools can teach values of tolerance, but students are also influenced by their environment outside of school. Therefore, collaboration with parents and the community is very important."

Limited supporting facilities and the absence of specific programs explicitly designed for multicultural education also hinder more systematic implementation. Although multicultural values have been integrated into various school activities, some schools lack guidelines or programs specifically focused on strengthening multicultural education and social inclusion.

Discussion

This study aims to analyze the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion practices in public schools within diverse communities in Jeneponto Regency. The research findings indicate that multicultural education has been implemented through the integration of values of tolerance, respect for diversity, equality, and cooperation into the learning process and school culture (Handayani & Wulandari, 2017). Although this implementation has not been institutionalized in the form of a specific curriculum, emerging practices in schools demonstrate a systematic effort to build an educational environment that values differences and encourages the equal participation of all students.

These findings strengthen the theoretical argument that multicultural education does not have to be presented as a separate subject but can be realized through the transformation of school culture, pedagogical practices, and social interactions that occur in everyday life (Suprapti, 2018). This perspective aligns with the concept of multicultural education proposed by Banks (2015), who emphasizes that the primary goal of multicultural education is to create equal learning opportunities for all students through comprehensive reform of the educational environment. In the context of this research, schools function not only as academic institutions but also as social arenas that produce and reproduce diversity values through students' daily learning experiences.

One important finding of this research is that the implementation of multicultural education is realized more through social practices than through formal curricular approaches. Teachers integrate diversity values into learning, form heterogeneous learning groups, and encourage inclusive social interactions among students. This finding indicates that multicultural education in Jeneponto develops as a contextual social practice rooted in the daily experiences of the school community. This situation indicates that the success of multicultural education is not solely determined by the existence of policy documents or a formal curriculum, but also by the school's capacity to create social spaces that enable students to experience diversity directly.

From the perspective of the sociology of education, this finding can be understood as a form of reproduction of social values through educational institutions. Schools function as agents of socialization that shape students' mindsets and behaviors toward diversity (Suci et al., 2020). When schools consistently practice equality and respect for diversity, students not only acquire knowledge about tolerance but also internalize these values as part of their social identity. Thus, multicultural education contributes to the formation of social capital, which is essential for social cohesion in a pluralistic society (Futaqi, 2020).

This study also found that the practice of social inclusion goes hand in hand with the implementation of multicultural education. This relationship suggests that multicultural education and social inclusion are two complementary concepts. Multicultural education provides a normative foundation for respect for diversity, while social inclusion serves as a practical manifestation of these values in school life. These findings support the view that diversity can only lead to social integration if accompanied by mechanisms that enable all individuals to participate equally in various social activities (Condorelli, 2018).

From the perspective of social inclusion theory, the research findings indicate that schools have made efforts to reduce various forms of exclusion that could potentially arise due to differences in students' social backgrounds, economic backgrounds, or academic abilities. Equal opportunities to participate in academic and non-academic activities reflect efforts to redistribute opportunities, a key element in building an inclusive society (Jenkins et al., 2020). Thus, schools serve not only as places of learning but also as institutions that play a role in creating social justice at the micro level.

Another interesting finding is the strong influence of local culture in supporting the implementation of multicultural education. The values of cooperation, social solidarity, and togetherness that exist in the Jeneponto community have been shown to be cultural assets that strengthen inclusive practices in schools (Yusuf et al., 2020). This finding provides an important contribution to the development of multicultural education theory in developing countries, particularly in non-Western contexts. Much of the literature on multicultural education has evolved from the experiences of Western countries, focusing

on issues of race, ethnicity, and migration (Race, 2015). In contrast, this study demonstrates that in the Indonesian context, multicultural education can grow from local cultural values that have long been part of community life.

However, this study also identified several challenges that could potentially hinder the sustainable implementation of multicultural education. Limited teacher training, the lack of structured implementation guidelines, and the influence of social stereotypes from the external environment indicate that multicultural education still faces obstacles at both the institutional and structural levels. These findings indicate that the success of multicultural education cannot be solely attributed to schools but requires broader policy support from the government, families, and communities.

Theoretically, this study broadens understanding of the relationship between multicultural education and social inclusion by demonstrating that the two are not only conceptually related but also mutually reinforcing in everyday educational practice. Multicultural education fosters awareness of diversity, while social inclusion ensures that this awareness translates into concrete actions that enable all individuals to participate equally. This reciprocal relationship demonstrates that the success of multicultural education should be measured not only by changes in student attitudes but also by the ability of educational institutions to create an inclusive social environment.

This study has significant theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Theoretically, it strengthens the argument that multicultural education is a process of transforming school culture that goes beyond the integration of diversity material into the curriculum. The findings suggest that students' social experiences, interactions between individuals, and the organizational culture of the school are equally important factors in fostering multicultural awareness. Therefore, future development of multicultural education theory needs to pay greater attention to the dimensions of school culture and everyday social practices.

Practically, research findings indicate that teachers and principals hold a strategic position in building an inclusive educational environment. Therefore, teacher professional development programs need to be directed not only at improving pedagogical competence but also at strengthening their capacity to manage diversity and build inclusive learning. Furthermore, schools need to develop programs specifically designed to strengthen multicultural education through cross-cultural activities, social dialogue, and collaborative learning.

From a policy perspective, this research indicates the need for more systematic integration between multicultural education and national education policy. Both local and central governments need to develop guidelines for implementing multicultural education that are contextual and adaptive to the social characteristics of local communities. In the Jeneponto context, a local culture-based approach can be an effective strategy for strengthening multicultural education due to its high level of acceptance in the community.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the implementation of multicultural education in public schools in Jeneponto Regency has been carried out through the integration of values of tolerance, respect for diversity, equality, and cooperation into the learning process and daily school culture. These practices are supported by the active role of teachers in

creating inclusive learning, equality-oriented school leadership, and local cultural values that uphold togetherness and cooperation. The research findings also indicate that multicultural education contributes positively to strengthening social inclusion by creating equal opportunities for all students to participate in school life without discrimination. However, the implementation of multicultural education and social inclusion still faces several challenges, such as limited teacher training, suboptimal multicultural education programs, and the influence of social stereotypes originating from the external environment. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, developing more systematic school policies, and increasing collaboration between schools, families, and communities are needed to ensure the sustainability of multicultural education and social inclusion. Overall, this study confirms that schools have a strategic role as spaces for social transformation capable of developing a tolerant, inclusive generation capable of living harmoniously in an increasingly diverse society.

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