

Building Inclusion through Multicultural Teacher-Student Communication

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion practices have been widely implemented in education, particularly in elementary school, junior dan senior high schools in West Sumatra. "In contrast, the ways in which teachers' interpersonal communication operates in classroom interactions have not been widely studied. The purpose of this study is to analyze teachers' interpersonal communication in building inclusive communication in classrooms with diverse student backgrounds. The method used in this study is a qualitative research method with a case study approach. The data collection methods consisted of in-depth interviews, observation and documentation. Research findings indicate that teachers in schools with diverse students backgrounds engage in culturally responsive interpersonal communication. Teachers demonstrate cultural empathy through open interaction and encourage students from different backgrounds to voice their views. This contributes to strengthening social relations among students, reducing tendencies toward stereotyping, and promoting more equitable participation in the learning process. These findings underscore that classroom inclusion is not merely the result of formal policies or curricular design, but is continuously shaped through teachers' everyday communicative practices in managing cultural diversity.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, multiculturalism, diversity, equity inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Diversity often presents significant challenges in the field of education. Unequal treatment, discrimination, exclusion, and tension often occur in learning activities. If these issues are not addressed effectively, they can disrupt students' well-being, disrupt the learning atmosphere, and widen social disparities within school environments.

Over the past five years, cases of violence in educational institutions have shown a significant increase. This indicates significant challenges in creating safe and inclusive learning environments. According to the Jaringan Pemantau Pendidikan Indonesia (JPPI, 2024), there were 91 cases reported in 2020, rising to 142 in 2021, 194 in 2022, 285 in 2023, and finally reaching 573 cases in 2024. These incidents occurred across various educational settings, including schools, madrasahs, and pesantrens, encompassing physical and verbal violence, bullying, and discriminatory practices (Kompas.com, 2024; Detik Edu, 2024).

Recent research by Sunarwi and Amin (2023) indicates that a lack of teacher understanding regarding multicultural awareness contributes significantly to conflicts among students. These conflicts include bullying, social exclusion, and intergroup conflicts, which have negative implications for school learning. Without adequate guidance and teacher intervention, these tensions may escalate, disrupting the learning process and damaging peer relationships.

Consistent with the findings above, Damayanti, Yunus, and colleagues (2024) highlight that verbal bullying based on cultural identity constitutes a major issue at the elementary school level. Students frequently experience teasing, mockery, or discrimination due to their accents, ethnicity, or regional backgrounds. This form of bullying not only damages social relationships among students but also affects their psychological well-being, reduces learning motivation, and fosters a sense of injustice within the school environment.

At the secondary education level, research conducted by Parahyangan Catholic University (2024) reveals the presence of bullying practices targeting students from religious minority groups. Although anti-bullying policies are in place, their implementation remains weak, and teachers often lack adequate intercultural communication skills. As a result, religion-based discrimination persists and generates significant social pressure on minority students, which in turn reduces their academic engagement and sense of safety at school.

This study was conducted in response to various challenges related to diversity in the field of education that have not yet been adequately addressed. Although a number of studies have examined this issue, in-depth research that specifically explores the role of multicultural education in supporting the implementation of inclusive education remains relatively

limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore how multicultural education can support the implementation of inclusive education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication can be understood as a process of direct interaction between individuals that involves the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages, through which meaning is constructed within social relationships shaped by each individual's cultural background, identity, and experiences (DeVito, 2022; Wood, 2020). In multicultural societies, interpersonal communication does not occur in a neutral space; rather, it is continuously influenced by differences in culture, social identity, gender, language, and the values embedded in the communicators.

Gudykunst (2018) emphasizes that interpersonal communication in multicultural societies requires intercultural competence, such as cultural awareness, empathy, openness, and the ability to manage uncertainty and anxiety in interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Without such competencies, interpersonal communication is likely to give rise to misunderstandings, stereotyping, and social marginalization.

In line with this perspective, Wood (2020) emphasizes that diversity is not merely an external context of interpersonal communication, but an integral element that shapes relational dynamics and the quality of interaction. Therefore, effective interpersonal communication in multicultural environments requires sensitivity to identity differences and the ability to adapt messages in an inclusive manner.

In educational contexts, interpersonal communication that occurs between teachers and students, as well as among students, plays a strategic role in building inclusive learning environments. Communication that is responsive to diversity enables teachers to create equitable spaces for dialogue, reduce symbolic exclusion, and promote equal participation in the classroom. Accordingly, interpersonal communication competence becomes a crucial foundation for the implementation of multicultural and inclusive education

Multicultural Communication

Diversity in the educational context encompasses variations in culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and social background, all of which shape the ways students interact. Wood (2020) emphasizes that diversity forms identities that carry distinct perspectives, values, interaction patterns, and lived experiences. In teacher–student interactions, diversity becomes a key factor influencing how messages are interpreted, how relationships are built, and

how learning processes unfold. When diversity is recognized and valued, the classroom becomes a more inclusive environment.

Cross-cultural communication competence includes cultural sensitivity, empathy, and the ability to adapt one's communication style. According to Chen and Starosta (2020), cultural sensitivity refers to an active awareness of cultural differences and how these differences influence communication. Empathy enables teachers to understand students' perspectives across diverse cultural backgrounds, while communicative adaptation requires teachers to adjust their language choices, tone, and pedagogical approaches to make interactions more accessible and acceptable to students. These competencies support the development of inclusive learning environments.

Gay (2022) states that the use of inclusive communication styles, the establishment of classroom norms that value diversity, and the provision of equal opportunities for student participation are multicultural communication strategies that can effectively manage differences and prevent discrimination in the classroom.

Inclusion

Inclusive education is an educational approach that ensures all learners study together regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or special needs. UNESCO (1994) emphasizes that schools must adapt to the diverse needs of students, rather than expecting students to adjust to the system. Nationally, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology also highlights that inclusive education aims to provide every child with the widest possible opportunity to develop their potential within a learning environment that embraces diversity.

The core principles of inclusion include providing equal access for all students, valuing individual differences, encouraging active participation in the learning process, and ensuring a non-discriminatory environment. These principles help create a learning atmosphere in which every student feels accepted and respected.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), explains that individuals define themselves based on their membership in particular social groups, such as ethnicity, religion, language, or social status. In educational contexts, this theory helps illuminate how group identities shape interactions among students as well as between teachers and students. When students identify themselves as part of a particular group (ingroup), they tend to display closeness, solidarity, and cooperation with members of

that group. Conversely, they may perceive students from other groups (outgroups) as different, less connected, or even as individuals to be avoided.

In diverse classroom settings, these ingroup–outgroup dynamics can give rise to stereotypes, prejudice, minor conflicts, or even various forms of discrimination, especially when they are not properly managed. Social Identity Theory emphasizes that teachers must understand how group identities operate within students in order to create an inclusive learning environment, reduce potential conflicts, and foster positive interactions across groups.

METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to human or social problems. This type of research is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed through human interaction and experience.

According to Patton (2015), data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, non participant observations, and document analysis, all of which enable researchers to capture variations in meaning and the complexity of social processes. Informant selection typically employs purposive sampling, in which participants are chosen based on their ability to provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon under study. Charmaz (2014) adds that in qualitative research, the selection of informants is flexible and may evolve as the study progresses, particularly when new concepts or categories emerge. Additionally, Nyumba et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of aligning research objectives with informant characteristics to ensure depth and credibility of the data.

Data analysis is conducted in stages and occurs continuously throughout the research process, rather than only after all data have been collected. Patton (2015) highlights the importance of triangulation and reflexivity as strategies to enhance the validity of interpretations. Meanwhile, Braun and Clarke (2021) assert that thematic analysis allows researchers to systematically organize data, develop key themes, and construct coherent and meaningful analytical narratives about the phenomenon being examined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Diversity in the School

Several schools in Padang City have highly diverse student populations. This diversity is reflected in their ethnic backgrounds, including Minangkabau, Batak, Nias, Javanese, Mentawai, Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups. In addition, there is also religious diversity, with students

adhering to Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism. There are schools consisting of Minang and Nias students, others with Minang and Batak students, and so on. In general, the Minang ethnic group is the dominant ethnicity in schools in Padang City. In addition, another aspect of diversity is religion. Besides the dominant religion, Islam, some schools also have students who follow Christianity and other religions.

According to Banks (2016), schools must recognize, respect, and accommodate ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity within the educational process. The ethnic and religious diversity present in schools in Padang reflects a real and unavoidable condition in today's context, which naturally requires the implementation of a multicultural educational approach.

Students from the Minang ethnic group are more likely to play with other Minang students, and likewise, Muslim students are more likely to group together with other Muslim students. Although this pattern does not always lead to problems, it can create social distance between groups. The social distance that arises from such patterns, where students tend to interact only with peers from the same ethnic or religious group, can result in students having limited knowledge of peers from other groups, leading to shallow intergroup relationships. The lack of cross-group interaction reinforces negative assumptions or stereotypes about other groups.

Student diversity is an extraordinary asset for the school environment. Diversity gives students the opportunity to get to know one another and to understand different cultures. However, diversity can also generate potential conflicts or misunderstandings if not properly managed. Differences in communication styles reflect the unique habits, values, and parenting patterns shaped by each cultural background. These differences influence their character and the way they express themselves.

Stereotypes and prejudices that differ across cultural groups can trigger disagreements or tensions among students. Differences in religious practices also often become a source of conflict, for example, when non-Muslim students choose to wear a hijab at school out of fear of standing out or being teased by their peers. However, interviews with school authorities and the students involved reveal that schools actually allow non-Muslim students the freedom to wear uniforms in accordance with their religion. Cultural misunderstandings often arise from differences in dialects, habits, and communication styles, which can lead to minor conflicts in diverse settings (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012)

Multicultural Communication Between Teachers and Students

Based on an interview with a student in Padang City, the student reported that he learned a lot about various cultures because the school has

students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. He also stated that the school, particularly the teachers, never discriminates against students based on ethnicity; instead, they bring together students from different ethnic groups.

Based on an interview with a teacher at a school that has students from the Nias ethnic group who are Christian, the teacher always strives to understand each student's perspective. For example, when teaching about Minangkabau culture, the teacher asks students from non-Minangkabau backgrounds to explain how things are in their own cultures. This experience helps all students understand that they are diverse and come from different cultural backgrounds, so that differences do not lead to division or conflict among them.

The phenomenon of Minangkabau cultural dominance in schools reflects a social and cultural hierarchy within the educational environment, where the majority culture more frequently becomes the norm in daily interactions (Banks, 2016). However, the practice of teachers asking for the perspectives of students from minority cultures (such as Nias, Batak, or Javanese) demonstrates the application of multicultural communication and intercultural communication competence, which includes cultural sensitivity, empathy, and communication style adaptation (Chen & Starosta, 2020; Gay, 2022). This strategy enables students to understand cultural differences and prevents potential conflicts, in line with the principles of inclusive education.

Moreover, this teacher approach aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), in which students tend to identify themselves with their cultural group (ingroup) and perceive other groups (outgroup) differently. By inviting minority students to share their cultural experiences, teachers reduce the potential for stereotypes and prejudices between groups. This strategy also strengthens students' cross-cultural understanding, enhances empathy, and reinforces social cohesion in diverse classrooms (DeVito, 2022; Wood, 2020).

Based on field findings, multicultural communication practices between teachers and students not only focus on understanding the majority culture but also provide space for students from minority cultures to express their cultural identities. For instance, in several schools in Padang, non-Minangkabau students are allowed to showcase their cultural arts and traditions, such as the Tor-Tor dance from the Batak ethnic group, during school arts performances. This demonstrates that teachers and schools implement inclusive communication strategies by encouraging active participation from all students, respecting differences, and creating a learning environment that enables positive cultural exchange.

This approach aligns with the principles of multicultural education, which emphasize the recognition, appreciation, and utilization of diversity in the learning process (Banks, 2016), and supports the development of intercultural communication competence, including cultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptability in cross-cultural interactions (Chen & Starosta, 2005). Such strategies strengthen cross-cultural interactions, reduce the potential for conflicts or stereotypes, and enhance the sense of value and belonging among minority students, while also providing a learning opportunity for majority students to understand and respect cultural diversity within the school environment.

Interpersonal Communication in Managing Differences

Based on findings from several schools in Padang City, teachers strive to understand the cultural differences among their students. At the beginning of the learning process, teachers usually introduce themselves to all students, and then all students are asked to introduce themselves as well. When students come from different cultural backgrounds, teachers ask more detailed questions, such as where they are from, how long they have lived in Padang, whether they can speak Minangkabau, and other related questions. This is done to better understand each student and to implement more effective communication during the learning process.

In some cases, schools also teach local culture, emphasizing the principle of “wherever you stand, respect the local customs.” This means that minority students from different cultural backgrounds are encouraged to understand the culture of the place where they live, enabling them to interact positively and harmoniously with others.

The teachers’ ability to adjust their interactions with students from diverse cultural backgrounds demonstrates cultural intelligence, which is the capacity to understand, appreciate, and effectively adapt to cultural differences in social and professional contexts (Earley & Ang, 2003).

In classes with religious diversity, schools generally allow non-Muslim students to opt out of Islamic lessons. However, sometimes these students choose to stay in the classroom, engaging in activities such as drawing or other tasks. Additionally, in schools where *tahfizh* (Quran memorization) or *kultum* (short religious talks) are taught, teachers remain mindful of the presence of non-Muslim students. They strive to adapt their approach, for example, by emphasizing that all religions teach values of truth and righteousness, among other inclusive messages.

According to Cameron et al. (2011), Extended Intergroup Contact emphasizes that contact does not always need to be direct; observing or hearing about positive experiences of peers from other groups can also reduce prejudice and stereotypes. This aligns with the practice of teachers who emphasize the universal values of all religions, providing *vicarious positive contact* for students and thereby strengthening inclusive attitudes. Moreover, structured dialogue between different groups can foster understanding, empathy, and tolerance. Teachers who allow non-Muslim students to remain in the classroom while highlighting universal values facilitate an initial form of intergroup dialogue within the educational context (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013; Nagda, 2006).

Challenges in Implementing Inclusion within Diversity

Based on the researcher's observations and interviews with school staff, many teachers still have limited multicultural communication competence. Some teachers have not yet developed the ability to adjust their communication styles according to the diverse cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds of their students. In addition, the participation of students from minority groups, such as non-Minangkabau or non-Muslim students, is sometimes suboptimal. Several teachers also mentioned that they have not received adequate intercultural training, which makes it challenging to handle minor conflicts or cultural differences. Some students also show resistance to learning about other cultures due to a lack of understanding; for example, one non-Minangkabau student expressed little interest in learning Minangkabau culture because they did not fully understand it. This issue requires attention from teachers to prevent potential conflicts.

Lack of interest in learning about cultures different from one's own often indicates that individuals tend to view their own culture as superior to others, which lowers their motivation to engage with other cultures (Neuliep, 2017). In addition, cultural distance emphasizes that greater differences between one's own culture and another culture make cross-cultural engagement more challenging and less appealing (Chen & Starosta, 2005; Hofstede, 2001). Collectively, these concepts help explain why some students in Padang schools, particularly non-Minangkabau students, may initially be reluctant to learn about Minangkabau culture or other culturally different practices.

CONCLUSION

Schools in Padang City reflect a high level of ethnic and religious diversity, creating opportunities for students to learn from different cultural backgrounds in an inclusive environment. Teachers generally attempt to foster mutual understanding by recognizing students' cultural identities and

encouraging interaction across ethnic groups, which supports positive multicultural experiences in schools.

However, the findings also indicate that many teachers still have limited multicultural communication competence. Difficulties in adapting communication styles to diverse students, limited intercultural training, and low participation from minority students remain challenges. Therefore, strengthening teachers' intercultural communication skills is essential to prevent misunderstandings and to promote more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

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