

Research Article

# Building Harmony in Diversity: A Study of Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the concepts of pluralism and multiculturalism as well as the challenges and opportunities for their implementation in building social harmony in Indonesia through an educational approach. Using the literature study method and content analysis technique, this research examines various scientific sources related to pluralism, multiculturalism, and educational practices in plural societies. The analysis shows that pluralism and multiculturalism have a strategic position in building an inclusive and democratic society. However, the implementation of these values still faces various challenges such as cultural exclusivism, politicization of identity, and limited curriculum and teacher competence in multicultural education. On the other hand, there is great potential in implementing strategies such as strengthening diversity-based curriculum, integrating local wisdom values, and adaptive and contextual social education innovations. The research also highlights the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as well as collaboration between the government, educational institutions and communities in shaping a tolerant and just social environment. The conclusion of this research confirms that diversity management requires a comprehensive, systemic approach, rooted in local values, in order to create sustainable social harmony within the framework of the Indonesian nation state.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism; Pluralism; Tolerance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the most diverse countries in the world. It consists of more than 17,000 islands. Based on BPS data (2020), there are more than 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of regional languages that coexist in various parts of the archipelago. The motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* reflects the spirit of unity in diversity. However, empirically, various social conflicts against the background of ethnic, religious and cultural differences still occur frequently. Phenomena such as inter-religious intolerance, ethnic discrimination, and strengthened primordial sentiments show that diversity has not been fully managed constructively. This indicates that social harmony does not grow automatically in a plural society, but needs to be pursued through the right values, policies and education approaches (Syamsul Arifin, 2011: 27).

In a recent study, Lestari (2022) found that horizontal conflicts in several regions in Indonesia tend to be triggered by the lack of awareness of pluralism at the grassroots level, as well as the weak role of educational institutions in instilling the value of multiculturalism from an early age. Research by Hidayat and Kurniawan (2023) also shows that negative perceptions of other groups are still high among high school students in urban and semi-urban areas. These findings reinforce the assumption that pluralism and multiculturalism have not been effectively internalized, despite being widely raised in policy discourse.

A number of previous studies have discussed pluralism and multiculturalism in Indonesia, but most have focused on normative and conceptual aspects, without reaching the empirical dynamics at the community or educational institution level. For example, a study by Parekh (2000) reviews the principles of multiculturalism in a global theoretical context, while a study by Banks (2006) highlights multicultural education in the context of the United States. In Indonesia itself, multicultural education approaches that are contextual and based on local wisdom are still limited, so they have not been able to answer the complexity of factual and evolving social harmony issues. From this description, a gap can be identified between the theoretical approach of multiculturalism and the contextual needs of Indonesian society. This research stems from the need to answer the question of how the concepts of pluralism and multiculturalism can be applied in real terms in building social harmony in Indonesia, especially through the role of education. This is in line with the objectives of this research, namely analyzing the challenges and opportunities for the application of pluralism and multiculturalism in

Indonesian society, examining the strategic role of education in shaping inclusive and tolerant attitudes as the foundation of social harmony, and providing recommendations based on empirical findings to strengthen harmony between groups in the context of cultural and religious diversity. By examining the issues from theoretical and empirical perspectives, it is hoped that this study can make a concrete contribution to the development of a harmonious and sustainable model of social life amidst the plurality of Indonesian society.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the literature study method, the literature study research method can be interpreted as an arrangement or series of research related to the collection of library data sources, which are managed systematically, critically, and objectively related to building harmony in diversity: a study of pluralism and multiculturalism in Indonesia. The analysis technique in this research is content analysis, which can be interpreted as a process in searching and systematically compiling the data obtained, so that it can be easily understood to be published to the general public. In general, the technique is done by analyzing the research results in accordance with their order, such as the most relevant, relevant, slightly relevant, taking into account the most recent years of research.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Concept of Pluralism: Definition, Principles and Social Applications

In the social and political context, pluralism emphasizes the recognition of the existence of different groups based on ethnicity, religion, culture, or ideology in a common living space (Taylor, 1994). Bhikhu Parekh (2000) adds that pluralism is not merely diversity itself, but how society responds to diversity actively and normatively. In his view, pluralism requires people to continue to dialogue and negotiate on shared values without eliminating the characteristics of each group. There are several main principles that underpin pluralism in social life. First, pluralism recognizes that diversity is an unavoidable condition in modern society. This diversity should be seen as a wealth, not a threat. Second, pluralism upholds the equal dignity of individuals and groups. This means that there should be no discrimination on the basis of group identity. Third, the principle of dialog is very important in pluralism. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) mention that in a pluralistic deliberative democratic system, differences of opinion are not only tolerated, but used as a basis for open discussion and mutual learning. Fourth, pluralism rejects the hegemony of one group over another. It encourages inclusiveness in decision-making, whether in politics, education or social affairs.

### Social Application of Pluralism

Pluralism does not stop at the level of discourse, but must be implemented in everyday life. Pluralism can be implemented through various things, including through education, for example, pluralism is realized through a multicultural curriculum, which accommodates the values and history of various cultural and religious groups. This is in line with a study conducted by Mudhofir (2019) showing that multicultural education in schools in Indonesia is effective in shaping attitudes of tolerance and mutual respect between students from different backgrounds. Second, in the field of politics and public policy, pluralism is seen in the guarantee of protection of minority rights, as well as the involvement of groups that have been marginalized in the policy formulation process. A pluralist state ensures that no group is marginalized due to religious, cultural or ideological backgrounds. Third, inter-religious relations are also an important terrain for the implementation of pluralism. In a society like Indonesia that consists of various religions, pluralism is the basis for interfaith dialogue, which not only avoids conflict, but also builds interfaith cooperation. Third, through the mass media, the media has a central role in developing a pluralistic culture. Pluralistic media provides space for various narratives, representations and voices from community groups, so that there is no domination of culture or information by one group only.

### The Concept of Multiculturalism: Theory, Values, and Relevance

Globalization and high human mobility have reinforced the fact that modern societies consist of various cultural, ethnic and religious identities. In this context, multiculturalism emerges as a concept and approach to managing differences constructively. The issue of multiculturalism becomes increasingly relevant when intergroup friction increases due to social inequality, political exclusion, and ethnic prejudice. Multiculturalism theoretically developed as a response to the limitations of classical liberalism that overemphasized the individual and often ignored collective identity. Will Kymlicka (1995), one of the leading figures of multiculturalism theory, argues that in order to achieve true justice in a multiethnic society, special recognition of minority groups through collective rights or differential policies is required. According to Parekh (2000), multiculturalism rejects the notion that there is one superior value or culture. Instead, every culture has values and ways of life worthy of respect, provided they do not violate basic principles of human rights. As such, multiculturalism is part of an intercultural theory of social justice. Multiculturalism is also associated with deliberative democracy, where the participation of different groups in the public sphere is the basis for the legitimacy of democracy itself (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Multiculturalism as a normative approach to cultural diversity is not only a recognition of

the existence of plurality of identities, but also contains fundamental values that become the basis for building a just and inclusive society. These values form an important ethical framework for ensuring peaceful and productive living together in a pluralistic society. There are four main values that underpin the principles of multiculturalism, namely recognition, equality, intercultural dialogue and socio-political inclusiveness.

The value of recognition is the initial foundation of multiculturalism. Charles Taylor (1994) states that recognition of cultural identity is a fundamental human need, because self-identity is formed through social interactions colored by the perceptions and appreciation of others. In a multicultural society, recognition means acknowledging the existence, history, and contributions of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups fairly. Multiculturalism places equality as a core value in intergroup relations. However, equality in this context does not always mean formal equality of treatment, but can also mean different treatment to achieve equal results (equity). Multiculturalism does not simply encourage passive coexistence between groups, but also facilitates active dialogue between cultures. Bhikhu Parekh (2000) explains that in a plural society, there cannot be a single dominant value system. Therefore, dialog is needed to build mutual understanding, foster mutual respect, and avoid negative stereotypes. Intercultural dialog allows different groups to learn from each other and collaborate in shaping more inclusive social norms. Multiculturalism demands the active participation of all cultural groups in public life, including in politics, education and the media. Thomas Modood (2007) emphasizes the importance of minority representation in democratic institutions so that their voices are not marginalized. Inclusiveness means opening up fair participation spaces for all communities without forcing assimilation to the majority norm.

### The Relevance of Multiculturalism in Contemporary Social Contexts

Multiculturalism has high relevance in various aspects of social life, especially in countries with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds such as Indonesia, Canada and India. In Indonesia, the principle of multiculturalism has actually been embedded in the motto "Unity in Diversity," although its implementation still faces challenges such as religious-based discrimination, horizontal conflicts, and unequal access to resources. In the education sector, multiculturalism is realized through a multicultural education approach that integrates diversity values into the curriculum. According to the results of a study by Nasrullah (2021) in the *Multicultural and Multireligious Journal*, this approach has proven effective in shaping the character of students who are tolerant and open to differences. In addition, multiculturalism is also an important framework in formulating fair public policies, such as recognition of indigenous peoples, legal protection for religious minorities, and more equitable allocation of resources.

### The Relationship between Pluralism and Multiculturalism in the Indonesian Context

Indonesia as an archipelago with more than 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, and various religions is a clear example of a very plural and multicultural society. This diversity has since its inception been an integral part of the national identity, reflected in the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" which means "different but still one". Pluralism generally refers to the recognition of diversity and active efforts in creating spaces for dialogue between different groups. Charles Taylor (1994) states that pluralism demands recognition and respect for diverse cultural, religious and ethnic identities in a society. Meanwhile, multiculturalism emphasizes the co-existence of cultural groups and policies that support inclusion and equal rights between groups (Kymlicka, 1995). The two are closely related. Pluralism can be considered a philosophical foundation or basic value, while multiculturalism is its application in the form of social, educational, legal and governmental policies. In other words, pluralism is the moral-ethical foundation, while multiculturalism is the strategies and policies that emerge from the values of pluralism (Parekh, 2000).

In Indonesia, pluralism is reflected in basic state principles such as Pancasila, especially the first and third precepts that guarantee freedom of religion and unity in diversity. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is more visible in various government policies and programs such as multicultural education, regional autonomy, and protection of indigenous peoples' rights. According to research conducted by Mudhofir (2019), pluralism in Indonesia faces serious challenges due to increasing religious intolerance and identity politicization. Multiculturalism, despite being implemented in the education system and regional autonomy policies, is often hampered by power centralism and socio-economic inequality between groups. Research by Suparlan (2002) also underlines that the successful implementation of multiculturalism in Indonesia is highly dependent on strengthening the values of pluralism at the community level, especially in encouraging dialogue between groups and preventing stereotyping and discrimination. Pluralism and multiculturalism in the Indonesian context cannot be separated, but have complementary functions. Pluralism provides a normative foundation in the form of openness, respect and recognition of differences. Meanwhile, multiculturalism provides an operational framework for transforming these values into real life through education, law and government policies. For example, religious pluralism encourages interfaith dialog, while multiculturalism demands that state policies guarantee religious minorities the right to build houses of worship or celebrate their holidays. Without pluralism, multiculturalism would lose its ethical spirit; and without multiculturalism, pluralism would become a moral slogan with no real impact.

## Multicultural Education Theory as Social Strategy

Education plays a central role in shaping people's identities, values and interaction patterns. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, the challenge of education is not only about academic mastery, but also how to manage ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity inclusively. Therefore, multicultural education is an important strategy in maintaining diversity and creating a tolerant and harmonious social life. Multicultural education not only functions as a learning instrument, but also as a social strategy that encourages the transformation of attitudes, structures, and social relations between groups in plural societies. Multicultural education is an approach to the educational process that respects and recognizes cultural diversity, and seeks to instill values of equality, justice and respect for differences. Banks (2004) theorizes multicultural education as the integration of the experiences, values, histories, and perspectives of diverse groups into the educational curriculum. This theory grew out of criticism of an education system that is often homogeneous and biased towards the dominant culture, which ignores the contributions and existence of minority groups. Multicultural education offers an interdisciplinary approach to address long-standing structural inequalities in the education system and society in general (Nieto, 2010).

In a social context, multicultural education is not only understood as a teaching method, but also as a strategic tool in shaping a just and inclusive plural society. As a social strategy, multicultural education has the following dimensions:

### 1. Reduction of Prejudice and Intolerance

Through multicultural education, learners are introduced to different cultures, traditions and values, thus broadening their understanding and reducing negative stereotypes and prejudices. Nasrullah (2021), said that this approach proved effective in reducing the level of intolerance among students in multiethnic elementary schools.

### 2. Social Identity Reconstruction

Multicultural education provides space for students from different cultural backgrounds to see themselves positively in the nation's narrative. It helps shape an identity that is inclusive and nationalistic, without losing its local cultural characteristics. This process also serves as a means to heal social wounds resulting from historical marginalization.

### 3. Minority Group Empowerment

This strategy allows previously marginalized groups to gain recognition and access to equitable education. As Sleeter & Grant (2007) explain, multicultural education plays a role in dismantling the dominance of the majority culture and opening up space for equal participation in the learning process.

### 4. Democratization of Public Space

Multicultural education instills the values of democracy, dialogue and respect for differences from an early age. This is important in creating citizens who are critical, participatory and tolerant of diversity, thus strengthening social cohesion in a sustainable manner (Banks, 2004).

In Indonesia, multicultural education began to be adopted more systematically especially after the reform era. The national curriculum now includes materials that focus on tolerance, human rights and the values of Pancasila. However, challenges remain, such as disparities between regions, politicization of religion, and cultural exclusivism in some educational institutions. In a study by Suryadinata (2015), it was shown that the success of multicultural education is largely determined by the commitment of educators and a curriculum that is contextual to local diversity.

## Diversity Profile: Ethnicity, Language and Religion in Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the most diverse countries in the world. As an archipelago consisting of more than 17,000 islands, Indonesia is inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups, regional languages and religions. This diversity is both a wealth and a major challenge in building national cohesion. Understanding the profile of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity is important as a basis for developing inclusive policies and strengthening national identity that respects plurality. Ethnic diversity in Indonesia is very complex. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) and the results of the 2010 Population Census, Indonesia has more than 1,300 ethnic groups. The largest ethnicity is Javanese, which accounts for about 40% of the total population, followed by Sundanese, Batak, Madurese, Betawi, Bugis and other ethnicities. However, what is interesting is that most of these ethnic groups are spread across areas that are very different geographically, culturally and historically (Ananta et al., 2015). Anthropological studies show that inter-ethnic relations in Indonesia are dynamic, sometimes harmonious, but often tense, especially when there is a struggle for resources or issues of identity politics (Suparlan, 2002). Therefore, ethnic diversity is not only seen as a demographic fact, but also as a social arena that requires fair and inclusive management. Language diversity is a direct reflection of ethnic diversity. Based on data from the Language Agency of the Ministry of Education and Culture (2020), there are 718 regional languages spoken throughout Indonesia. Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese are the regional languages with the largest number of speakers. However, many regional languages are classified as endangered because they are only used by small groups and lack reinforcement from the younger generation. Indonesian, as the national language, plays an important role in unifying the nation. However, according to Lauder (2008), the main challenge in language policy is how to balance the role of Indonesian as a national

language without marginalizing regional languages as local identities. Therefore, the preservation of local languages is an important part of the strategy of multiculturalism and strengthening local identity within the national frame. In terms of religion, Indonesia also shows a high level of plurality. Constitutionally, Indonesia recognizes six official religions: Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Based on data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2020), the majority of Indonesia's population follows Islam (around 87%), while the rest consists of Protestant Christianity (6.9%), Catholicism (2.9%), Hinduism (1.7%), Buddhism (0.7%), and Confucianism (0.05%). Although Islam is the majority religion, religious diversity is evident in daily life, especially in areas such as Bali, Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, and North Sumatra. Inter-religious relations in Indonesia are generally peaceful, although in recent decades there have been increasing cases of intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities. Research by Mujani and Liddle (2009) indicates that religious identities are often mobilized for practical political purposes, which can threaten social cohesion if not managed wisely.

## Potential and Challenges of Diversity in Social Life

Diversity or plurality in society, which includes differences in ethnicity, religion, culture, language, and other social identities, is an inevitable social reality, especially in Indonesia. Diversity can be a great strength in building a creative, dynamic and innovative society. However, in reality, diversity also often creates the potential for conflict, exclusivism, and social discrimination if not managed wisely. Diversity in social life holds enormous potential in enriching the dynamics of society, especially in the context of a pluralistic nation like Indonesia. Diversity, which includes differences in ethnicity, culture, religion, language and other social backgrounds, is not just a demographic fact, but also a source of social power that can encourage people to be more adaptive, creative and open to change. In a social setting, the differences present do not have to be divisive, but instead can be a bridge for productive collaboration. A plural society allows for the exchange of diverse ideas, values and practices, which in turn broadens horizons and enriches collective identity.

One of the main potentials of diversity is its contribution to social and cultural innovation. When individuals from different backgrounds interact with each other, new perspectives are born that can strengthen society's capacity to solve common problems. In this case, diversity becomes a space for dialog that allows synergy between groups, resulting in more inclusive and holistic solutions. Richard Florida (2004) states that cultural diversity in a community can create a conducive climate for the emergence of a creative class, which is a group of people who are able to create breakthroughs in the fields of art, technology and economy because of the encouragement of a social environment that is open to differences. Furthermore, diversity also strengthens national identity if managed with the principle of inclusiveness. In Indonesia, the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" reflects the philosophy that differences are not a threat, but rather part of the wealth of the nation. When various groups feel recognized and valued within the state structure, there will be a high sense of belonging to the national identity. Ananta et al. (2015) noted that one of Indonesia's strengths in maintaining social stability lies in the collective awareness that diversity is a cultural heritage that must be preserved together. In addition, diversity also strengthens the social capital of society through interactions between diverse groups. This social capital is in the form of trust, norms and social networks that enable individuals or groups to work together for a common goal. Putnam (2000) mentions that societies that are open to diversity tend to have high levels of social participation and strong social stability, because they are based on the principles of mutual trust and solidarity across identities.

Thus, diversity in social life is not just a reality that must be accepted, but also a strategic asset that can encourage social, economic and political progress. This potential will only be achieved if diversity is managed with the principles of justice, equality, and respect for the rights of all groups in society. Although rich in potential, it also brings various complex challenges, especially in Indonesia's multicultural society. These challenges arise when differences in identity, whether ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic. If not managed fairly and wisely, it opens up opportunities for social tension, discrimination, and even horizontal conflict. Reality shows that diversity does not automatically produce harmony; on the contrary, without an inclusive social and political framework, diversity can actually strengthen social boundaries between groups and cause fragmentation in society.

One of the main challenges of diversity is the emergence of identity conflicts that stem from a sense of threat to the existence of one group over another. In many cases, cultural and religious identities become a source of polarization when politicized by elites or exploited in the competition for power. This has happened in various communal conflicts in Indonesia, such as in Ambon and Poso, where differences in identity were used as a means of mass mobilization that led to violence. Research by Brown (2005) confirms that such conflicts are often not solely due to cultural differences themselves, but rather due to structural inequalities that trigger social injustice. In addition to conflict, diversity also presents challenges in the form of discrimination against minority groups. Societies that overemphasize majority norms and culture risk excluding groups that are considered different. This discrimination can take many forms, such as restrictions on religious rights, exclusion of certain ethnicities, or unequal access to education and employment. Mujani and Liddle (2009) in their study showed that intolerance towards minorities in Indonesia is often exacerbated by weak law enforcement and low public literacy in the values of pluralism and human rights. Another challenge is the tendency towards social exclusivism, a situation where certain groups limit social interactions to members of their own group. This creates separate social enclaves

and weakens the bonds between citizens. In the long run, such conditions have the potential to undermine the sense of community and weaken the foundations of the nation-state. The lack of interaction between groups makes people vulnerable to prejudice, stereotypes and misleading information, especially in the digital age where identity-based hoaxes are fast spreading. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and sustainable diversity management strategy. The state must be present through inclusive public policies, multicultural education, and legal protection for vulnerable groups. Without these concrete steps, diversity, which was originally the wealth of the nation, can turn into a source of social disintegration.

## Cases of Conflict and Tension in Plural Societies

Diversity in a pluralistic society brings two conflicting sides. On the one hand, it is a social force that enriches interactions and cultural dynamics; but on the other hand, diversity also holds the potential for conflict and tension if not managed fairly and wisely. In Indonesia, various cases of conflict that have occurred in the last two decades show that differences in identity such as religion, ethnicity, and culture can be a source of serious social tension, especially when exacerbated by economic inequality, political exclusion, and provocation from certain actors. One of the most significant examples is the communal conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi, which occurred from late 1998 to the early 2000s. The conflict started as a small clash between Muslim and Christian youth groups, which then developed into large-scale violence with a religious background. In his research, Brown (2005) explains that the Poso conflict was not just a religious conflict, but was also triggered by social inequality, economic inequality, and weak law enforcement institutions that failed to control the escalation of violence. The tension lasted for years and caused thousands of casualties and massive displacement.

A similar case occurred in Ambon, Maluku, in 1999 and the early 2000s. The conflict involved two major groups, Muslims and Christians, who had lived side by side for decades. However, when a violent incident erupted in Mardika Market, the conflict quickly spread throughout the city. In a report by the International Crisis Group (2000), the Ambon conflict was exacerbated by dissatisfaction with regional autonomy policies, the presence of armed militia groups, and the influx of national sectarian issues. The conflict became one of the most tragic symbols of the failure of diversity management at the local level. In urban areas, tensions also often arise due to politicized sectarian issues. A clear example can be seen in the 2017 DKI Jakarta Regional Election contestation, where religious and ethnic differences were used explicitly to attack certain candidates. Studies conducted by Mietzner and Muhtadi (2018) show that social polarization at that time showed how differences in identity can be mobilized for short-term political interests, but have a long impact on the social cohesion of society. These phenomena show that conflict in plural societies often does not stand alone as a spontaneous event. It is an accumulation of various structural, historical and political factors. When state institutions are weak, the distribution of resources is unequal, and the space for dialogue between groups is limited, the differences in identity that should be a wealth turn into a tool for division.

## Education as a Means of Building Harmony

The curriculum plays an important role in shaping the character of students, not only in the cognitive aspect, but also in the affective and moral aspects. In the context of a pluralistic society like Indonesia, the curriculum becomes a strategic instrument to internalize tolerance values from an early age. Tolerance, as an attitude of mutual respect for differences in religion, culture, ethnicity and views, cannot emerge naturally without a planned and continuous educational process. Therefore, how the curriculum is designed and implemented determines the creation of a generation that is able to live harmoniously in the midst of diversity. In a pedagogical perspective, value internalization is the process of instilling values through learning that involves understanding, raising awareness, and forming attitudes. The curriculum is the main medium in this process because it includes all learning experiences designed by educational institutions. According to Banks (2004), a multicultural or inclusive curriculum not only reflects diversity, but also encourages cross-cultural dialogue and an understanding of social justice. In Indonesia, the national curriculum has incorporated tolerance values in various subjects, especially Pancasila and Citizenship Education (PPKn), Religious Education, and History. Values such as respect for differences, inclusive attitudes, and anti-discrimination are inserted in the core and basic competencies. However, the effectiveness of the curriculum in internalizing these values depends not only on the content, but also on the learning approach used by teachers. Nasrullah (2021) shows that in some elementary schools in Indonesia, tolerance values can grow strongly when teachers are able to apply dialogic approaches, case studies, and experiential learning.

In addition to formal content, the hidden curriculum, namely values transmitted through school culture, relationships between students, and teacher exemplary also play an important role in internalizing tolerance. If the school environment reinforces the practice of exclusivism, discrimination or domination of certain cultures, then the formal messages in the curriculum will lose their effectiveness. Conversely, when schools create an inclusive and fair interaction space, students will more easily absorb and apply tolerance values in their daily lives (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). However, implementing a curriculum that supports tolerance still faces challenges, including cultural resistance, lack of teacher training in multicultural education approaches, and inconsistencies between the values taught and the social realities faced by students. In many cases, curricula that are supposed to promote inclusivity become a tool for reproducing the dominance of the

majority culture if they are not designed sensitively to the local context (Amin, 2017).

## Teacher Competencies in Multicultural Education

Teachers are not only required to master teaching materials and pedagogical methods, but also have competence in managing diversity in the classroom. Multicultural education requires teachers who are able to understand, appreciate, and integrate the values of cultural diversity, ethnicity, religion, and social background in learning practices. Teacher competence in multicultural education is not limited to cognitive aspects, but also includes dimensions of attitude, skills, and critical awareness of issues of social injustice and discrimination. According to Banks (2004), teachers in multicultural education must have the competence to transform the curriculum to be more inclusive, and be able to use teaching approaches that foster tolerant and appreciative attitudes towards differences. This requires an understanding of students' cultural backgrounds, as well as sensitivity to the identity dynamics that may develop among learners. Teachers need to facilitate the classroom as an environment of dialog, not domination of a particular culture. Research by Sleeter and Grant (2007) shows that teacher competence in multicultural education includes at least four main aspects: (1) awareness of social and cultural diversity in the learning environment, (2) knowledge of multicultural theories and approaches in education, (3) ability to choose learning methods that are responsive to students' backgrounds, and (4) professional attitudes that support the principles of justice, equality, and respect for differences.

In Indonesia, the challenge of strengthening teacher competence in multicultural education is still quite significant. Research conducted by Amin (2017) shows that many teachers still have a limited understanding of the concept of multicultural education. Most only understand diversity as cultural or ceremonial knowledge (such as introducing regional clothing or food), but have not touched structural aspects such as inequality in access to education, curriculum bias, or discriminatory practices in schools. This condition is exacerbated by the lack of teacher training that specifically emphasizes a multicultural approach. The teacher education curriculum in universities is generally still oriented towards a general pedagogical approach, without considering the socio-cultural context in which teachers will teach. As a result, teachers are ill-prepared to manage ethnically, religiously or socio-economically diverse classrooms. To strengthen teachers' competence in multicultural education, interventions are needed at several levels: first, the integration of multicultural education into teacher education programs; second, ongoing training that provides practical skills in managing pluralistic classrooms; and third, the evaluation of school policies to support an inclusive and nondiscriminatory learning climate. In other words, teachers are the main agents in shaping a culture of tolerance in schools. Multicultural competence is not an add-on, but an integral part of the professionalism of today's teachers. When teachers have adequate awareness and skills in managing diversity, schools are not only places of learning, but also social laboratories to form democratic, just and humane citizens.

## Multicultural Education Practice Experience in Schools/Madrasahs

Schools and madrasahs are strategic spaces for implementing multicultural values in real life. The experience of multicultural education practices in a number of schools shows that its implementation is highly dependent on school leadership, teacher competence, and school culture that is built collectively. A study by Nasrullah (2021) in several multiethnic primary schools in West Java revealed that multicultural values such as tolerance, mutual cooperation, and respect for religious differences are taught not only through formal lessons such as Civics and Religious Education, but also through daily practices. Teachers actively create an inclusive classroom atmosphere, for example by encouraging discussions between students with different backgrounds and avoiding the practice of homogenizing values. In madrasahs, the multicultural education approach has its own challenges, given that the madrasah environment is often associated with a relatively homogeneous religious background. However, research conducted by Nurhadi (2020) in a state madrasa aliyah in Yogyakarta shows that multicultural education practices can still be effectively implemented through the integration of Islamic values that are *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all nature). In the study, teachers utilized inclusive Islamic values as a basis for teaching respect for people of other religions. The madrasah also actively organizes interfaith activities and social visits to houses of worship of other religions as a form of hands-on learning about diversity. In addition, experiences in schools based on cultural inclusiveness show that the habituation of a school culture that respects differences plays a major role in the success of multicultural education. Teachers and principals not only act as teachers but also as role models in cross-cultural interactions. A study by Riyanto (2018) shows that schools that successfully implement multicultural education generally have clear internal policies, such as the avoidance of excessive use of religious symbols, a uniform policy that is flexible to local cultures, and the involvement of parents from various backgrounds in school activities. However, the practice of multicultural education also faces a number of obstacles. In some areas, teachers' limited understanding of the concept of multiculturalism, lack of specialized training, and resistance from the surrounding community are the main challenges. Some teachers still view diversity narrowly as a celebration of differences, such as cultural days or art performances, without touching on issues of social inequality, prejudice and discrimination that also need to be criticized in education. Thus, the experience of multicultural education practices in schools and madrasahs in Indonesia shows that successful implementation is strongly influenced by the commitment of all school components. School is not only a place to teach, but also a social space where the values of tolerance, justice, and respect for diversity must be lived and practiced. When multicultural education is implemented consistently and contextually, schools can become the foundation for the

formation of a more inclusive and peaceful society.

## Education Policy Analysis and its Challenges

Education policy is a strategic instrument in determining the direction of human development through a structured learning system. In Indonesia, education policy is not only designed to improve academic quality, but also to address social challenges such as access gaps, cultural diversity, and quality inequality between regions. However, although various policies have been launched by the government to improve the national education system, implementation in the field often faces various challenges, both in terms of technical, structural and cultural. One of the most prominent education policies in the last two decades is the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), which replaced the Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP). This curriculum is designed to develop students' competencies as a whole through a thematic approach and process-based assessment. In concept, K-13 aims to instill critical thinking skills, character, and social and cultural literacy (MoEC, 2016). However, various studies have found that the implementation of this curriculum has not been optimal in many schools, especially in the 3T (frontier, outermost, disadvantaged) areas.

The study conducted by Suryaman et al. (2020) shows that many teachers have difficulty in changing the instructional learning approach to an active and participatory approach as expected in K-13. The main factors hindering implementation are the lack of adequate training, limited facilities, and high administrative burden on teachers. These conditions resulted in deviations between curriculum design and classroom practice. In addition, the zoning policy that has been implemented since 2018 has also created its own dynamics. The main purpose of zoning is to create equitable quality of education by bringing students closer to the nearest school, while eliminating the image of favorite schools. However, in practice, this policy has led to protests from the community, especially parents of students in urban areas, because it is considered to limit choice and sacrifice quality. An analysis by Nuhung (2019) states that the zoning policy fails to address the root of the problem, namely the quality inequality between schools, which should be addressed first before implementing the student distribution system.

On the other hand, education policy also faces ideological and cultural challenges, especially in strengthening national values and tolerance. Although the government has encouraged the integration of Pancasila values in character education, its implementation in schools is still formalistic. Research by Amin (2020) states that many schools only make character education a slogan without touching the formation of substantive attitudes through daily practices. This indicates the need for policy evaluation from the cultural side - not just administrative - so that education can answer complex social challenges, such as radicalism, intolerance and value disintegration. Another fundamental challenge is the disparity in access to education between cities and villages. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021) shows that children in rural areas are less likely to complete secondary education than those living in cities. Unequal education infrastructure, lack of qualified educators, and limited learning facilities are the main barriers. Despite affirmative programs such as Indonesia Pintar or BOS (School Operational Assistance), many of these policies are unable to completely remove the structural barriers faced by learners in marginalized areas. From a policy perspective, this shows that the formulation and implementation of education policies must take into account the local context, the participation of stakeholders, and evaluation based on data and field realities. Education cannot be homogenized through a top-down approach alone, but must be built through dialogue between the state, society and educational institutions.

## Strategies for Strengthening Harmony in Diversity

### Strengthening Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue

In a society characterized by the complexity of ethnic, cultural and religious identities, intercultural and interreligious dialogue becomes a fundamental necessity to maintain social harmony and prevent conflict. In Indonesia, as a historically and demographically plural country, strengthening this dialog is not only a moral responsibility, but also a socio-political strategy in maintaining national cohesion. Dialogue built on mutual respect and willingness to listen to differences is not an attempt to homogenize beliefs or values, but a process of finding common ground amidst diversity. Strengthening intercultural and interreligious dialogue departs from the awareness that diversity is an unavoidable social reality, and should instead be celebrated as a collective wealth. In the theoretical framework, dialog is understood as a two-way communication process that is not just an exchange of information, but also the establishment of equal relations between different individuals and groups (Bakhtin, 1981). In a religious context, dialogue is not meant to equalize doctrines, but to build mutual understanding, destroy stereotypes, and encourage collaboration in an inclusive social space (Swidler, 2013).

Research by Mukti Ali (1997) underlines the importance of a dialogical approach in maintaining inter-religious relations in Indonesia. According to him, the history of this nation has shown that religious diversity can coexist as long as the community and its leaders place dialogue as part of the culture. He emphasized the importance of theological dialogue (openly recognizing the teachings of other religions), social dialogue (interfaith cooperation on humanitarian issues), and dialogue in daily life (natural interaction in neighborly and social life). At the practical level, intercultural and interreligious dialogue has been pursued through various programs and initiatives, both by the state and civil society. One example is the

existence of the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB), which was established in almost all provinces and districts/cities in Indonesia. FKUB is a forum for dialogue between religious leaders that functions to mediate conflicts, strengthen tolerance, and encourage local policies that favor harmony. A study conducted by Anam (2019) shows that the existence of FKUBs contributes positively to reducing tensions, especially in areas with a history of religious conflict. However, strengthening intercultural and interreligious dialogue still faces a number of challenges. One of them is the strong religious exclusivism and resistance to differences that are taught culturally and structurally, both in the family environment, education, and the media. Research by Syamsul Arifin (2017) states that some people still view other religions with suspicion, due to the lack of diversity literacy and the influence of intolerant narratives spread through social media. In addition, dialogue efforts are often elitist and do not reach grassroots communities. Many dialog forums only involve religious leaders or intellectual figures, while the general public is not actively involved. In fact, the success of dialogue depends on the broad involvement of all levels of society, especially the younger generation. Intercultural education in schools and campuses, as well as community-based interfaith activities, are forms of strengthening dialogue that reach the grassroots and can shape a culture of peace from below. Thus, strengthening intercultural and interreligious dialogue must be done thoroughly, both through state policies, education, and community social movements. Dialogue must be made part of the culture of living together, not just a response to crisis. In the midst of increasing intolerance and polarization, building equal, open and sustainable dialogue is the key to maintaining the integrity of the nation amidst growing diversity.

### Collaboration between Government, Educational Institutions, and Communities

Collaboration between the government, educational institutions and communities is an important foundation in realizing an inclusive, relevant and equitable education system. These three elements complement each other in their functions and responsibilities, and play a strategic role in creating a learning environment that not only educates academically, but also shapes the character and social awareness of students. In the context of multicultural education, this collaboration becomes increasingly important, given the challenges of diversity and the need for education that is able to build tolerance and social cohesion. The government as a policy maker has a role in providing regulations, funding and infrastructure that support a fair and equitable education system. Through relevant ministries, the government sets the curriculum, education standards and affirmative policies for marginalized groups. For example, the Indonesia Pintar program, BOS (School Operational Assistance), and zoning policies are all instruments of the state in expanding access and improving the quality of education. However, top-down policies are often ineffective without the active involvement of communities and educational institutions themselves (Tilaar, 2002).

Educational institutions, both formal such as schools and universities, and non-formal such as course institutions and learning community centers, serve as the main implementers of education policy. They are the spearhead in translating the values set by the state into learning practices. The role of principals, teachers and lecturers is crucial in creating a learning environment that respects diversity, fosters tolerance and cultivates a sense of social responsibility. According to research by Arifin (2017), educational institutions that actively collaborate with local communities tend to be more successful in instilling multicultural values because the learning is contextual and relevant to the lives of students. Communities, on the other hand, function not only as beneficiaries of education but also as active partners in the education process itself. The role of parents, traditional leaders, religious leaders and civil society organizations is very significant in supporting a holistic vision of education. When the community is involved in school decision-making through school committees or community forums, there is a process of democratization of education that strengthens a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. A study by Sudjana (2010) emphasizes that community participation in education contributes directly to improving the quality of learning, student discipline and the success of school programs. Effective collaboration between these three elements is not only structural but also cultural. It requires open communication, respect for each other's roles and participatory mechanisms in every education planning and evaluation process. Challenges to this collaboration usually appear in the form of inequality of authority, lack of coordination or domination of one party over another. In some cases, schools feel that the community is interfering too much in education, or vice versa, the community feels that they are not given the space to be involved. Therefore, strengthening collaborative governance needs to be a priority in future education policy design. By building synergy between the government, educational institutions and the community, education will not only be an instrument of human development, but also an effective tool for social transformation. This collaboration is important not only in the context of basic education, but also in building a culture of democracy, strengthening character, and solving social problems collectively.

### Local Wisdom Approach in Building Tolerance

Local wisdom is a system of values, norms and cultural practices that grow and develop from generation to generation in society. In the context of Indonesia's ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse society, local wisdom plays an important role in building and maintaining tolerance values. Different from formal approaches that are often top-down, local wisdom-based approaches offer ways that are more contextual, participatory, and deeply rooted in the historical experiences and social dynamics of local communities. Local wisdom contains values of living together, mutual respect, gotong royong, and deliberation that inherently support the practice of tolerance in everyday life. In various indigenous communities in

Indonesia, such as the Balinese with the concept of Tri Hita Karana, the Bugis-Makassar community with the principle of Sipakatau (mutual humanization), or the Javanese community with the philosophy of tepa selira (tolerance and empathy), these values have long been implemented and proven to be a social mechanism in resolving differences without violence. According to Rahardjo (2010), local wisdom is a social instrument that is closest to the community, and therefore most effective in fostering mutual respect in the midst of diversity.

Research by Suyanto and Subandowo (2017) shows that in areas with strong local wisdom traditions, the level of identity-based conflict tends to be lower. This is because communities already have custom-based conflict resolution mechanisms that encourage dialog and deliberation, rather than confrontation. For example, in post-social conflict Maluku, local communities rebuilt interfaith harmony by reviving the Pela Gandong tradition - a system of brotherhood between Muslim and Christian villages that emphasizes the principles of mutual help and respect. This tradition is not only a symbol of reconciliation, but also a foundation for strengthening peaceful co-existence. In education, the local wisdom approach has also begun to be integrated into learning as part of character and multicultural education. A study by Fauziah (2021) in a multiethnic elementary school in West Kalimantan showed that the introduction of local culture through folklore, traditional games, and local art activities can build students' empathy towards friends from different backgrounds. Local wisdom in this case not only enriches teaching materials, but also shapes students' awareness of the importance of tolerance in daily social interactions. However, the local wisdom approach in building tolerance also faces challenges. Globalization and modernization often erode local cultural practices that have been a buffer for social harmony. In addition, uniform education and development policies often ignore the distinctiveness of local values and replace them with technocratic approaches. This can result in a separation between the local value system and the practice of daily life, thus reducing the effectiveness of local wisdom in instilling tolerance. Therefore, strengthening local wisdom in building tolerance requires an integrated strategy. The state needs to provide space for the community to maintain and revitalize local cultural values, both through educational policies, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. Local wisdom must be given a place in the curriculum, social practices, and forums for cross-cultural dialogue so that it remains alive and plays an active role in shaping a tolerant and peace-loving generation.

## Adaptive and Contextual Social Education Innovation

Social education is one of the strategic areas in shaping the character of critical, caring and socially responsible citizens. In the midst of the changing dynamics of society, social education is required to continue to innovate in order to remain relevant to the social realities faced by students. Innovation in social education does not only mean the use of technology in learning, but more deeply, it concerns the way education responds to local and global issues with an adaptive and contextual approach. Adaptive social education refers to the ability of curriculum, learning methods and educational content to adjust to rapid social change. Meanwhile, contextual education means that learning is adapted to the social, cultural and geographical conditions in which learners live. In this context, innovation becomes an important process to develop an approach that is able to answer the real needs of students, rather than simply channeling abstract social theories.

The study by Sapriya (2011) emphasizes that social education should be able to equip students with critical thinking skills, social empathy, and the ability to face community problems directly. Therefore, innovative approaches such as problem-based learning, social projects and local case studies are key to making social education more vibrant and meaningful. In this way, learners not only understand concepts, but are also able to apply them in the context of real life. Concrete examples of contextualized social education innovations can be found in educational practices in some schools that integrate local issues such as environmental damage, poverty, social conflicts, and gender inequality into teaching materials. Research by Fitriyah (2020) in a secondary school in Central Java showed that the integration of local environmental issues into Civics and Social Studies lessons was able to increase students' social awareness and encourage them to create environmentally conscious campaign projects in their communities.

In addition, social education has also begun to adopt digital technology-based approaches that are used critically. In the era of digital media and disinformation, media literacy is an important part of social education. According to Kartowagiran (2018), innovations in social education need to include students' ability to sort out information, understand media dynamics, and form opinions based on facts. The use of social media, interactive videos, and e-learning platforms integrated with contextual social content are part of the effort to build smart digital citizenship. However, although the potential for innovation is enormous, its implementation is not free from challenges. One of the main obstacles is resistance to change from both teachers and institutions. Teachers who are used to conventional methods often find it difficult to implement more participatory and flexible learning models. In addition, the lack of support for facilities and training is also a significant obstacle. Research by Sani and Asri (2019) shows that many social education teachers in the regions have not received adequate training on project-based learning or integration of local issues.

Thus, adaptive and contextual social education innovation is not only a matter of technical updates, but also a change in the educational paradigm itself. Social education must be oriented towards empowering learners to become social change agents who are sensitive to their surrounding environment. Support from various government parties, schools, teachers and the community is key so that this innovation can be widely and sustainably implemented.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Multicultural and pluralism education is not only a theoretical approach in responding to diversity, but has become a strategic necessity in building an inclusive and tolerant Indonesian society. Through the synergy between curriculum, teacher competence, local wisdom, and public policies that are sensitive to social contexts, values such as recognition, equality, and dialogue can be effectively internalized in people's lives. Challenges such as discrimination, exclusivism and identity conflicts point to the need for adaptive social education innovations and strengthened collaboration between stakeholders. With fair and sustainable diversity management, Indonesia has great potential to strengthen social cohesion and fight for justice for all groups within the framework of a democratic nation state.

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