

Managing Multicultural Education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum: Strategies, Challenges, and Insights

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education fosters inclusivity, social cohesion, and mutual respect in diverse societies. Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum provides a flexible, student-centered framework, making it a strategic platform for integrating multicultural education. This study examines the implementation, challenges, and institutional support for multicultural education within the Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on how schools manage diversity in teaching and learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis in selected junior high schools using a qualitative case study approach. Findings reveal inconsistent implementation due to teacher preparedness gaps, resource limitations, and resistance to change. While some schools integrate multicultural content effectively through inclusive teaching practices and extracurricular programs, others struggle due to inadequate teacher training and a lack of culturally diverse materials. Institutional support is critical, as schools with structured policies and administrative backing demonstrate more effective multicultural education practices. This study underscores the need for targeted teacher training, the development of multicultural learning resources, and stronger institutional policies. Addressing these challenges will enhance cultural inclusivity, student engagement, and cross-cultural understanding in Indonesian education. Future research should explore long-term impacts and best practices for sustaining multicultural education within the evolving Merdeka Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural nation, home to diverse ethnicities, traditions, languages, and religions (Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023; Jayadi et al., 2022; Mariyono, 2024). While this diversity is a strength, it also challenges ensuring social harmony and inclusivity, particularly in education. Schools serve as microcosms of society, where students from various cultural backgrounds interact daily (Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Farida et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2023). Thus, integrating multicultural education into the national curriculum is crucial to fostering mutual respect, tolerance, and social cohesion (Benediktsson, 2022; Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Hummelstedt et al., 2021).

Multicultural education is an approach that recognizes, respects and incorporates cultural diversity into teaching and learning processes. It aims to create an inclusive educational environment where students from different backgrounds feel valued and represented. Banks (1993) proposed a five-

dimensional multicultural education framework, including content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and school culture empowerment. These dimensions emphasize that effective multicultural education goes beyond curriculum adjustments, requiring structural changes to teaching methods and school policies to ensure equity and inclusivity.

In the Indonesian context, research on multicultural education remains limited, though some studies highlight its importance. [Budirahayu & Saud \(2021\)](#) found that multicultural education in Indonesian schools is often implemented informally through extracurricular activities and teacher initiatives rather than systematically embedded in the curriculum. Similarly, research by [D'hondt et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested that while schools recognize the value of multicultural education, the lack of structured guidelines and teacher training often results in inconsistent implementation. These studies highlight the need for a comprehensive framework that aligns with national education policies, such as the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

The *Merdeka* Curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of Education in 2022, was designed to provide a more flexible, student-centered, and competency-based learning experience. One of its primary objectives is to develop well-rounded individuals who embody the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (the Pancasila Student Profile), which emphasizes critical thinking, inclusivity, and global awareness. The curriculum allows teachers greater autonomy in designing lessons, making it an ideal framework for incorporating multicultural education into daily classroom practices.

Despite its potential benefits, implementing multicultural education within the *Merdeka* Curriculum is not without challenges. Schools often face resistance to change, limited resources, and varying levels of understanding among educators regarding multicultural pedagogy ([Purnamasari et al. 2024](#); [Suncaka, 2024](#)). Furthermore, deeply ingrained societal norms and biases may hinder the effectiveness of multicultural initiatives ([Izzati et al., 2023](#); [Mazid et al., 2021](#)). Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning, teacher training, and institutional support to integrate multicultural education into the curriculum successfully.

While previous studies have explored the significance of multicultural education and its role in fostering inclusivity, a gap exists in understanding how it is specifically managed within the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Existing research often focuses on general multicultural education frameworks or case studies from Western contexts, but there is limited empirical evidence on how Indonesian schools operationalize multicultural education in their curricula. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the strategies, challenges, and practical implementations of multicultural education management within the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

Furthermore, this study builds upon [Banks' \(1993\)](#) multicultural education framework by examining how Indonesian schools apply its principles in real-world educational settings. It also considers insights from previous studies, which argue that multicultural education must go beyond content modification and actively address inequalities in school structures and pedagogy ([Elias & Mansouri, 2023](#); [Hajisoteriou & Sorkos, 2023](#); [Parameswaran et al., 2024](#)). By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of multicultural education within Indonesia's evolving educational landscape.

By bridging these gaps in the literature, this study contributes to the growing discourse on multicultural education management in Indonesia, offering evidence-based recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers. Findings from this study will help shape future strategies for creating inclusive learning environments that reflect Indonesia's rich cultural diversity and align with the *Merdeka* Curriculum's objectives. Through an analysis of multicultural education strategies, implementation challenges, and best practices, this research offers practical insights for schools looking to foster inclusivity and prepare students for a diverse, interconnected world. By examining how schools manage multicultural education within the *Merdeka* Curriculum, this study seeks to enhance educational policies, teacher training programs, and curriculum development efforts in Indonesia.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study method ([Mishra & Dey, 2022](#)) to examine how multicultural education is managed within the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Qualitative research is chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of educators' experiences, perceptions, and

practices in implementing multicultural education. The case study method provides a detailed and contextual analysis of the strategies, challenges, and solutions developed within school settings. The study does not aim for generalization but to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of how multicultural education is operationalized in Indonesian schools under the new curriculum framework.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in junior high schools implementing the *Merdeka* Curriculum, focusing on schools with diverse student backgrounds. The schools were selected based on their commitment to multicultural education principles and their willingness to participate in the study.

Participants in the study included:

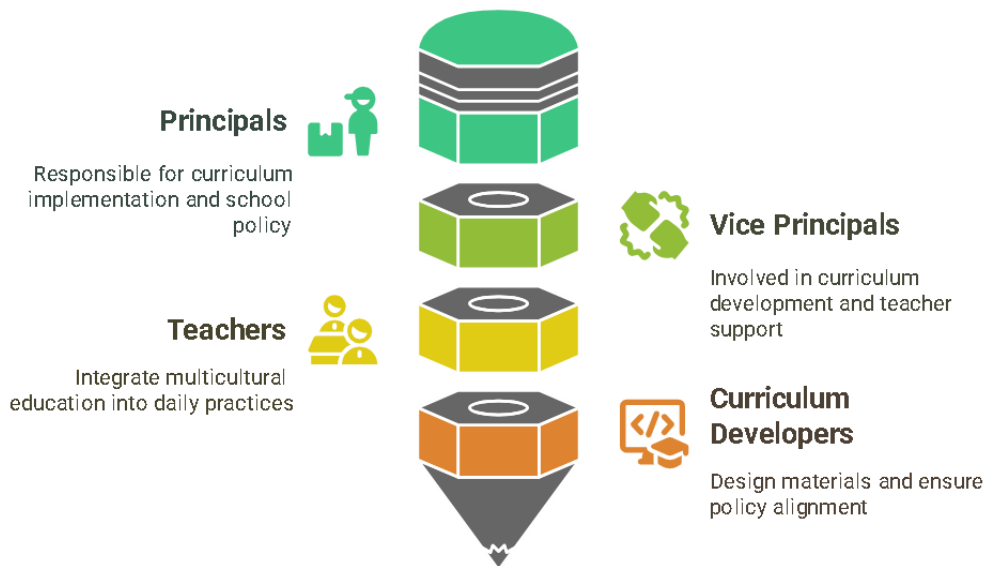


Figure 1. Research Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants ([Andrade, 2021](#)). This method ensures that only individuals with direct experience in multicultural education management within the *Merdeka* Curriculum were included, thereby increasing the relevance and reliability of the findings.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using three primary methods:

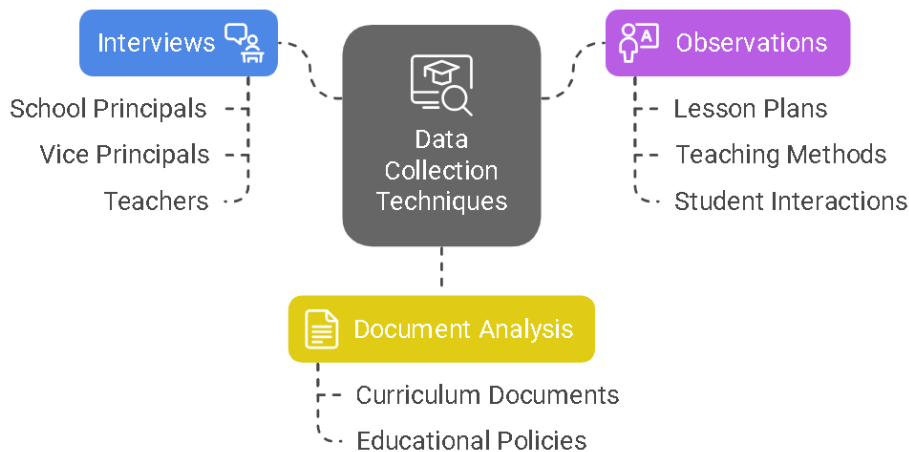


Figure 2. Data Collection Techniques

The first technique involved semi-structured interviews with school principals, vice principals, and teachers. The interviews focused on strategies for integrating multicultural education, the challenges encountered during implementation, and the effectiveness of existing policies and programs in promoting inclusivity. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and, with permission from the participants, they were recorded to ensure accuracy during data analysis.

The second technique was classroom observation to examine how multicultural education principles were applied in actual teaching practices. Observations focused on several key indicators, including using inclusive teaching strategies, integrating multicultural content into lesson plans, and student engagement in culturally diverse classroom settings. Observations were conducted non-participantly, meaning that the researcher did not interfere with the teaching process but documented activities objectively.

The third technique was document analysis, which involved reviewing school curriculum documents, lesson plans, and educational policies related to multicultural education. This analysis aimed to assess whether multicultural perspectives were explicitly incorporated into the *Merdeka* Curriculum and whether teachers adhered to these guidelines in their lesson planning and classroom activities. The document analysis also helped to compare policy intentions with actual classroom practices.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for identifying key qualitative data themes and patterns. The analysis process which consists of the ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)):



Figure 3. Miles and Huberman's Interactive Mode

The first step, data reduction, involved sorting and organizing the collected data to focus only on information relevant to multicultural education management. This process included transcribing interview recordings, summarizing observation notes, and categorizing key findings from curriculum documents. The second step, data display, involved presenting data in an organized format, such as tables and thematic maps, making identifying trends and relationships between different aspects of multicultural education implementation easier. The final step, conclusion drawing, and verification, involved identifying key themes related to the strategies, challenges, and best practices of multicultural education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The study employed triangulation, a technique that cross-checks data from multiple sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. By comparing insights from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the study ensured that its conclusions were accurate, well-rounded, and free from individual bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before the study to ensure that research procedures adhered to established ethical standards. All participants were provided detailed information about the study's objectives, methods, and expected outcomes. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used in interview transcripts and reports, and all personal information was securely stored to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The study also adhered to non-maleficence, ensuring that no psychological, professional, or social harm came to participants due to their involvement in the research.

RESULTS

Implementation of Multicultural Education in the Merdeka Curriculum

The findings indicate that multicultural education has been implemented in the *Merdeka Curriculum* through various strategies. Teachers reported integrating multicultural content into their lesson plans by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, historical narratives, and literature from different ethnic groups. During an interview, one teacher stated:

"I always try to include examples from different ethnic backgrounds when teaching history. For example, when discussing Indonesian independence, I highlight the contributions of various ethnic groups, not just the majority group." (Interview, Teacher A)

Observations further confirmed that some teachers actively used visual aids, storytelling, and student-led discussions to foster inclusivity. In one observed classroom, a teacher used a case study of local traditions from different regions of Indonesia to engage students in a discussion about cultural identity. However, the extent of integration varied across schools, with some teachers relying on traditional textbooks that lacked multicultural representation.

Extracurricular programs also serve as a key component of multicultural education. Schools have introduced cultural exchange activities, traditional arts and music classes, and collaborative projects encouraging students to appreciate different cultural traditions. One principal explained:

"We celebrate cultural diversity through school-wide events such as Hari Kartini and International Language Day. Students wear traditional clothing and present cultural performances." (Interview, Principal B)

Additionally, some schools have formed partnerships with local communities and cultural institutions, allowing students to participate in workshops and field trips. Document analysis of school event reports confirmed that schools with strong community engagement had more structured multicultural programs than those without external support.

Strategies for Managing Multicultural Education

Despite the efforts to integrate multicultural education, several challenges were identified. One major challenge is the limited availability of teaching resources that adequately represent Indonesia's diverse cultures. Many teachers reported that existing textbooks and learning materials do not sufficiently cover multicultural perspectives, requiring them to develop additional materials independently. During an interview, a teacher expressed frustration about the lack of resources:

"The textbooks only focus on the dominant culture. I have to search for additional materials online or create my worksheets to include cultural diversity in lessons." (Interview, Teacher D)

Another significant challenge is teacher preparedness. While some schools provide professional development programs, many teachers admitted difficulty applying multicultural education strategies effectively, particularly in non-human subjects like mathematics and science. Classroom observations revealed minimal integration of multicultural perspectives in science and mathematics classes, with most lessons remaining focused on technical knowledge rather than cultural inclusivity.

Resistance to change was also reported as a challenge. Some educators and parents expressed concerns that multicultural education might disrupt traditional teaching methods or introduce perspectives unfamiliar to students. One vice principal mentioned:

"Some parents question why we emphasize multicultural education. They believe it takes time away from core subjects like math and science." (Interview, Vice Principal A)

Additionally, some students from dominant cultural groups showed reluctance to engage in multicultural activities. Observations showed that in schools where multicultural education was not emphasized, students tended to stay within their cultural groups, limiting cross-cultural interactions.

Student Engagement and Multicultural Awareness

Student engagement in multicultural education varied across different schools. In schools where teachers actively incorporated multicultural perspectives, students displayed higher cultural awareness and enthusiasm. In an observed classroom, a teacher assigned a project where students had to interview their grandparents about cultural traditions and present their findings. The students were actively engaged and expressed excitement in learning about different cultures. However, in schools where multicultural education was not strongly emphasized, students displayed lower levels of interest and awareness. Some students struggled to understand the relevance of multicultural education, leading to passive participation in related activities. A student interviewed in one such school admitted:

"We don't talk about different cultures in class. It's mostly about finishing the lessons in the textbook." (Interview, Student A)

Teachers in these schools also noted that it was difficult to motivate students to engage with multicultural learning without strong institutional support. Observations further confirmed that classroom discussions with little emphasis on cultural inclusivity were monotonous, with limited cross-cultural interactions.

Institutional Support and Policy Implementation

Institutional support was identified as a critical factor in the success of multicultural education. Schools with strong administrative backing could implement more comprehensive multicultural programs, including teacher training, curriculum development, and student engagement activities. Principals in these schools actively promoted multicultural values and ensured that policies were effectively translated into classroom practices. One principal stated:

"We provide regular teacher training on inclusive education. We also allocate budget for cultural events and field trips." (Interview, Principal C)

Conversely, schools with limited administrative support faced difficulties consistently implementing multicultural education. Some teachers reported a lack of clear guidelines and policies from education authorities, which led to inconsistencies in how multicultural education was incorporated into the curriculum. Additionally, funding limitations affected the ability of some schools to organize multicultural events and purchase culturally inclusive learning materials. Document analysis of school budget reports showed that schools with dedicated funding for multicultural programs had more sustainable and well-structured initiatives.

DISCUSSION

Multicultural Education in the Merdeka Curriculum: Opportunities and Challenges

The findings reveal that multicultural education has been implemented within the *Merdeka* Curriculum through various strategies, including curriculum integration, extracurricular activities, and inclusive teaching approaches. These findings align with the multicultural education framework, emphasizing content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and school culture empowerment ([Banks, 1993](#)). Schools incorporating these dimensions create a more

inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. The flexibility of the *Merdeka* Curriculum offers opportunities for schools to develop contextualized multicultural education programs, enabling educators to address diversity more effectively ([Budirahayu & Saud, 2021](#); [Khalim & Parut, 2025](#); [Rumawang et al., 2024](#)).

Despite these opportunities, the implementation of multicultural education is inconsistent across schools, with some institutions struggling due to limited resources and teacher preparedness. While the curriculum allows teachers to modify lesson plans to reflect cultural diversity, many educators lack sufficient training in developing and delivering multicultural content. This finding is consistent with the previous study, which noted that multicultural education in Indonesia is often implemented informally, with significant variation in how different schools approach it ([Budirahayu & Saud, 2021](#); [Mariyono, 2024](#); [Tamyiz et al., 2023](#)). Schools with strong administrative support and access to multicultural resources are more successful in implementing multicultural education, while those lacking these elements face greater challenges.

Another challenge is aligning multicultural education with standardized assessments and academic performance expectations. Teachers often feel pressure to prioritize exam preparation over inclusive education strategies, limiting the time for integrating multicultural content. As a result, some schools view multicultural education as a supplementary aspect of learning rather than a core component. To fully integrate multicultural education into the *Merdeka* Curriculum, there needs to be a policy shift that recognizes cultural inclusivity as a fundamental element of student development rather than an optional addition to the curriculum ([Khalim & Parut, 2025](#); [Purnamasari et al., 2024](#); [Suncaka, 2024](#)).

The Role of Teachers in Multicultural Education

The findings suggest that teachers play a pivotal role in the success of multicultural education. In classrooms where teachers actively integrate diverse perspectives and inclusive teaching methods, students demonstrate higher cultural awareness and engagement levels. Teachers who incorporate real-world cultural examples, interactive discussions, and storytelling techniques help students better understand different traditions and social values. It supports the previous argument that teachers must move beyond content modification and address structural inequalities in school pedagogy by actively promoting equity and representation in education ([Cruz et al., 2024](#); [Estefan et al., 2023](#); [Lewis et al., 2023](#)).

However, the lack of teacher training remains a significant barrier. Many teachers expressed uncertainty about incorporating multicultural elements, especially in mathematics and science, where cultural perspectives are not traditionally emphasized. This finding is consistent with the previous study, which found that inadequate teacher preparation often hinders multicultural education's effectiveness ([Lewis et al., 2023](#); [Resch et al., 2023](#)). Without specialized training, teachers may resort to superficial representations of diversity, such as celebrating cultural festivals, without fostering critical discussions about inclusivity and equality.

Additionally, some teachers experience difficulty in managing diverse classrooms, particularly in addressing biases and stereotypes among students. Teachers reported challenges in facilitating discussions on sensitive cultural topics, as some students hold preconceived notions that lead to misunderstandings or resistance. In such cases, schools need to provide structured professional development programs that equip teachers with conflict-resolution skills, inclusive teaching methodologies, and strategies for fostering mutual respect in the classroom ([Bakay, 2023](#); [Biasutti et al., 2021](#); [Elias & Mansouri, 2023](#)). By enhancing teacher competencies, schools can implement multicultural education effectively and meaningfully.

Student Engagement and the Impact of Institutional Support

Student engagement in multicultural education varies depending on institutional support and teacher commitment. Schools that provide structured multicultural programs, regular assessments, and culturally inclusive learning materials tend to foster higher student participation. It supports the previous study's argument, which suggests that culturally responsive teaching significantly enhances student motivation and learning outcomes ([Eguchi et al., 2021](#); [Yu et al., 2020](#)). When students are exposed to diverse perspectives and inclusive teaching methods, they are more likely to develop

intercultural competence and a sense of global citizenship ([Chiba et al., 2021](#); [Kjellgren & Richter, 2021](#); [Papadopoulou et al., 2022](#)).

Conversely, schools that lack institutional support and clear policy direction experience lower levels of student engagement. In these schools, students often perceive multicultural education as irrelevant to their academic goals, leading to passive participation. Observations in classrooms with weak multicultural education programs showed that students were less inclined to engage in discussions about cultural diversity, instead focusing on traditional lesson structures. These findings align with the previous study, which emphasizes that students' attitudes toward multiculturalism are shaped by broader societal influences, meaning that schools must actively work to create inclusive learning environments that encourage participation ([Bakay, 2023](#); [Khanolainen et al., 2024](#); [Killen & Rutland, 2022](#)).

Another factor influencing student engagement is peer dynamics and social norms within schools. In some cases, students from dominant cultural backgrounds display reluctance to engage with multicultural content, perceiving it as less relevant to their experiences. Teachers noted that students tended to interact within their cultural groups, limiting opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. To counteract this, schools should implement peer mentoring programs and collaborative learning activities that require students from different backgrounds to work together on multicultural projects, helping to break down social barriers and encourage meaningful intercultural interactions ([Aifan, 2021](#); [Buchs & Maradan, 2021](#); [Kier & Johnson, 2021](#)).

The Challenge of Resistance to Change

One of the most significant challenges identified in the findings is resistance from educators, parents, and students to multicultural education. Some teachers and parents expressed concerns that multicultural education might distract from core academic subjects, a viewpoint that reflects traditional educational values rather than an appreciation for holistic learning. This resistance is similar to the previous findings, which noted that multicultural education often faces ideological opposition, particularly in societies where dominant cultural narratives are deeply ingrained ([D'hondt et al., 2021](#); [Kang, 2021](#); [Smagorinsky, 2022](#)). Overcoming this resistance requires greater advocacy and awareness-building to emphasize the benefits of inclusive education.

A major concern among some parents is the fear that multicultural education promotes certain ideologies over others, leading to hesitancy in embracing curriculum changes. Some parents believe that teaching cultural diversity should be done at home rather than in schools, which limits institutional efforts to promote inclusivity. As previous study suggests, addressing parental concerns through community engagement and transparent communication can help ease resistance and foster greater acceptance of multicultural education initiatives ([Berlian & Huda, 2022](#); [Parameswaran et al., 2024](#); [Vassallo, 2021](#)).

For students, resistance often comes from social norms that reinforce cultural divisions. In schools where inclusivity is not actively promoted, students may feel uncomfortable engaging in multicultural discussions or intercultural activities. Schools can address this by normalizing multicultural education through consistent curriculum integration, representation in learning materials, and active student-led initiatives ([Li, 2025](#); [Rumawang et al., 2024](#)). When students see multiculturalism embedded in daily school life, they are more likely to embrace diversity and develop a stronger sense of inclusivity.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight both the progress and challenges in implementing multicultural education within the *Merdeka* Curriculum. Schools that actively integrate multicultural perspectives through curriculum adjustments, extracurricular activities, and inclusive teaching methods demonstrate higher student engagement and cultural awareness. Teachers who employ differentiated instruction, storytelling, and collaborative projects successfully foster a more inclusive classroom environment. However, the extent of implementation varies, with some schools lacking clear guidelines, resources, and institutional support, leading to inconsistent application of multicultural education principles.

One of the key challenges identified is the lack of teacher preparedness and multicultural teaching resources. Many educators struggle to effectively integrate multicultural perspectives into traditionally

content-driven subjects, such as mathematics and science. Additionally, resistance from educators, parents, and students poses a significant barrier, particularly in communities where multicultural education is perceived as less relevant or conflicting with traditional values. Institutional support plays a crucial role in overcoming these challenges, as schools with strong administrative backing and structured policies tend to implement multicultural education more effectively and sustainably.

Several steps must be taken to strengthen multicultural education within the Merdeka Curriculum. First, comprehensive teacher training programs should be developed to equip educators with practical strategies for integrating cultural diversity into their teaching. Second, the availability of multicultural learning materials should be expanded to ensure that all subjects incorporate diverse perspectives. Third, schools must foster an inclusive culture by encouraging peer mentoring, student-led initiatives, and community partnerships. Finally, policy reinforcement and continuous evaluation are necessary to ensure that multicultural education is implemented, monitored, and improved over time. By adopting these strategies, Indonesia can create an education system that embraces diversity, promotes inclusivity, and prepares students for a globally connected world.

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