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Integrating Multicultural Perspectives in History Education under the Merdeka Curriculum: A Critical Case Study from Post-Colonial Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study critically explores the incorporation of multicultural perspectives within history education under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem, a school characterised by considerable ethnic and religious plurality. Employing a qualitative case-study approach, the research scrutinises teachers' conceptualisations and applications of multicultural values, along with the obstacles they encounter and students' perceptions of such learning. Findings indicate that although teachers display commitment to tolerance and inclusivity, multicultural integration remains superficial, involving tokenistic content inclusion that fails to engage with the structural and epistemological dimensions of transformative education. This superficiality is compounded by ambiguous curriculum guidelines, insufficient professional development, and persistent examination-driven teaching practices. The study contends that meaningful multicultural history education in post-colonial settings must move beyond tolerance discourse towards critical interrogation of power, narrative construction, and the epistemic foundations of historical knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Multicultural Education; History Education; Merdeka Curriculum; Post-Colonial Pedagogy; Indonesia

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini secara kritis mengkaji integrasi perspektif multikultural dalam pendidikan sejarah di bawah Kurikulum Merdeka di SMA Negeri 1 Lasem, sekolah dengan keragaman etnis dan agama signifikan. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian menelaah konseptualisasi dan penerapan nilai multikultural oleh guru, hambatan yang dihadapi, dan persepsi siswa. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meski guru berkomitmen pada toleransi, integrasi multikultural masih dangkal, menyertakan konten simbolis tanpa menyentuh dimensi struktural dan epistemologis pendidikan transformatif. Kedangkalan diperparah oleh pedoman kurikulum ambigu, kurangnya pengembangan profesional, dan praktik pengajaran berorientasi ujian. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendidikan sejarah multikultural yang bermakna di konteks pascakolonial harus melampaui wacana toleransi menuju telaah kritis kekuasaan, konstruksi narasi, dan fondasi epistemik sejarah.

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Introduction

Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), encapsulates the fundamental challenge confronting the world's largest archipelagic nation: how to maintain national cohesion while acknowledging and celebrating profound ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. With over 1,300 ethnic groups, more than 700 languages, and six officially recognised religions, Indonesia represents one of the most diverse nations on earth (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). This diversity, while a source of national pride, also presents persistent challenges, including the risk of ethnic and religious conflict, the marginalisation of minority groups, and the tension between national identity formation and the recognition of plural identities (Eddyono, 2020; Farabi, 2025; Sealy et al., 2022).

Education has historically been central to the Indonesian state's project of nation-building. From the New Order's centralised curriculum, which instrumentalised history education for state legitimisation, to contemporary reforms aimed at fostering critical citizenship, the school curriculum has served as a primary site for shaping national identity and transmitting values (Eddyono, 2020; Pratama, 2022). History education, in particular, has occupied a privileged position in this project, charged with cultivating national consciousness, patriotism, and an understanding of the nation's journey from colonial subjugation to independence (Tröhler, 2020).

The introduction of the Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum in 2022 represents the most significant curriculum reform in Indonesia's recent educational history. Designed partly as a response to learning losses during the COVID-19 pandemic and partly as a broader initiative to improve educational quality, the curriculum emphasises essential materials, student-centred learning, and character development through the Pancasila Student Profile (*Profil Pelajar Pancasila*) (Kementerian Pendidikan, 2022; Rohmah et al., 2024). Among the profile's six dimensions, *Kebhinekaan Global* (Global Diversity) explicitly addresses multicultural competencies, including the ability to appreciate diversity, engage with multiple perspectives, and demonstrate intercultural understanding (Utami et al., 2025). This dimension signals a policy commitment to preparing students for life in a pluralistic society.

However, the translation of policy aspirations into classroom practice remains deeply problematic. Research on previous curriculum reforms in Indonesia has consistently identified gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities, with teachers struggling to translate reform mandates into practice amidst limited professional development, inadequate resources, and the persistence of teacher-centred pedagogies (Ndomondo, 2024; Ndomondo et al., 2022). These challenges are amplified in the context of multicultural education, which requires not only new pedagogical approaches but also fundamental shifts in how teachers conceptualise history, knowledge, and the purposes of education (Wansink et al., 2021).

This study addresses these challenges through a critical examination of multicultural perspectives integration in history education under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem, a public senior high school in Rembang Regency, Central Java. Lasem presents a particularly rich context for investigating multicultural education. The town has a complex history of ethnic and religious coexistence, including significant Chinese Peranakan communities, diverse religious populations, and a history of inter-ethnic relations that includes both conflict and cooperation (Atabik, 2016). The school's student

body reflects this diversity, with students from Javanese and Chinese ethnic backgrounds and adherents of Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the Indonesian context. As educational systems across the Global South grapple with the challenge of preparing students for citizenship in diverse, post-colonial societies, understanding how multicultural education is conceptualised and implemented in specific institutional and cultural contexts becomes increasingly important (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2025; Godsell et al., 2024). By examining the integration of multicultural perspectives in history education, this study contributes to broader international conversations about the purposes of history education, the politics of knowledge, and the possibilities for transformative pedagogies in post-colonial contexts.

Research Questions

1. How do history teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem conceptualise and implement multicultural values in history education under the Merdeka Curriculum?
2. What obstacles impede effective integration of multicultural perspectives?
3. How do students perceive and respond to multicultural dimensions of history instruction?

Literature Review

Multicultural Education: Conceptual Foundations and Critical Perspectives

Multicultural education emerged in the context of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, sharing with that movement a focus on eradicating both interpersonal and systemic racism (Lidher et al., 2024; Santiago & Dozono, 2024). However, as Sleeter, (2024) observes, over time many have come to understand and enact multicultural education in ways that evade grappling directly with racism and power, diluting it to a celebration of cultural diversity while maintaining silence about structural inequalities. This dilution is particularly relevant for understanding multicultural education in post-colonial contexts, where the language of tolerance and diversity may mask persistent inequalities and the marginalisation of minority perspectives.

James Banks's foundational framework provides essential analytical tools for assessing the depth and quality of multicultural education. Banks (2019) identifies five dimensions of multicultural education that distinguish superficial tokenism from genuine transformative practice. Content integration refers to the extent to which teachers use examples, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts in their subject area (Banks, 2019). This is the most commonly understood dimension but, as Banks emphasises, it is only the first step. The knowledge construction process involves helping students understand how knowledge is created and how it reflects the social, cultural, and power positions of its creators (Banks, 2019). This dimension is particularly significant for history education, as it challenges the notion of history as a neutral account of facts and opens space for examining how narratives are constructed, whose perspectives are included, and whose are marginalised (Santiago & Dozono, 2022).

Prejudice reduction focuses on developing positive attitudes toward different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Equity pedagogy involves modifying teaching to facilitate

academic achievement among students from diverse backgrounds. Finally, an empowering school culture and social structure requires transforming the entire school environment to promote equity and inclusion (Banks, 2019). Banks (2019) argues that meaningful multicultural education requires attention to all five dimensions, yet most schools focus narrowly on content integration without engaging the deeper epistemological and structural dimensions.

Banks's framework distinguishes between different approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. The contributions approach adds heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements without changing the curriculum's basic structure. The additive approach appends ethnic content, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum. The transformation approach changes the curriculum's basic assumptions, enabling students to view concepts, issues, and events from diverse perspectives. The social action approach goes further, empowering students to make decisions and take action on important social issues (Banks, 2019). Most schools, Banks observes, operate at the contributions or additive levels, achieving superficial diversity without transformative change. Research by (Smets, 2024) confirms that effective multicultural education requires moving beyond surface-level content integration toward pedagogical approaches that foster critical reflection and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Post-Colonial Perspectives on History Education

Understanding multicultural education in Indonesia requires situating analysis within post-colonial theoretical frameworks. Indonesia's educational system bears the imprint of Dutch colonial rule, which established a stratified system privileging Western knowledge while marginalising indigenous epistemologies (Joseph & Matthews, 2014). The post-independence period saw efforts to decolonise education, yet these efforts have been uneven and contested. The New Order regime's centralisation of curriculum and instrumentalisation of education for state legitimisation created a system in which compliance and conformity were rewarded over critical thinking and intellectual independence (Pratama, 2022).

Contemporary scholarship on decolonising education in Indonesia emphasises that the country still faces epistemic dependency on state-centred and Eurocentric narratives (Pratama, 2022). Research by Utami et al.'s (2024) demonstrates that the decolonisation of Indonesian history curriculum has been a complex process shaped by political dynamics, with the government attempting to foreground national narratives while grappling with colonial legacies (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2025). History education, in particular, remains shaped by what scholars term "epistemic dependency" on state-centred narratives (Dube & Moyo, 2023; Pratama, 2022; R'boul, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile, with its dimensions of global diversity and critical reasoning, represents an attempt to move beyond this dependency while maintaining the nation-building function of education. However, the tension between cultivating critical historical consciousness and inculcating prescribed values remains unresolved in curriculum policy and classroom practice (Smets, 2024).

Critical pedagogy, as articulated by Freire et al.'s (2018), provides additional analytical tools for understanding the transformative potential of multicultural history education. Freire's critique of "banking education," in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive students, resonates with the transmission-oriented pedagogies that continue to

dominate Indonesian history classrooms (Pratama, 2022; Santiago & Dozono, 2022). Critical pedagogy calls for education that enables students to develop critical consciousness (*conscientização*), recognise and challenge oppressive structures, and become agents of social transformation. In the context of history education, this means moving beyond the transmission of nationalist narratives toward enabling students to interrogate narratives, consider multiple perspectives, and develop their own ethical orientations toward the past (Edling et al., 2020; Popa, 2023; Thorp & Persson, 2020). Research by Bartelds et al. (2020) highlights that empathetic pedagogy in national history learning can serve as a strategy for developing reflective historical competencies within within the national curriculum framework.

Historical Thinking and Multicultural Competence

The integration of multicultural perspectives in history education requires attention to the epistemological dimensions of historical inquiry. Wineburg's (2001) work on historical thinking emphasises the "unnatural" character of genuine historical understanding, which requires overcoming presentism and recognising the fundamental otherness of the past. This recognition entails not only cognitive operations but also profound affective dimensions: the discomfort of confronting perspectives that challenge our own, the ethical complexity of judging historical actors without anachronism, and the empathy required to engage with people whose worlds differ fundamentally from ours.

Wineburg's framework has particular relevance for multicultural history education. Historical thinking, he argues, teaches us "to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we've been born" (Wineburg, 2001). This capacity for self-transcendence is essential for developing multicultural competence, which requires moving beyond one's own cultural framework to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Research trends in Indonesian history education from 2019 to 2024 indicate growing attention to historical thinking as a framework for developing critical competencies, though implementation remains uneven (Research trends in history education on historical thinking in Indonesia, 2025).

Rüsen et al.'s (2017) typology of historical consciousness offers a complementary framework for understanding how students' engagement with the past operates at different levels of sophistication. Traditional and exemplary forms treat the past as a repository of fixed lessons or moral exemplars; critical forms interrogate dominant narratives; genetic forms recognise historical change as dynamic and contingent. The development of multicultural historical consciousness requires movement toward critical and genetic forms, enabling students to recognise the constructed nature of historical narratives, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the ethical dimensions of historical interpretation (Popa, 2023; Thorp & Persson, 2020). Research on historical consciousness in Indonesian education reveals that students' historical awareness often remains at traditional and exemplary levels, where traditions are perceived primarily as cultural heritage rather than as subjects of critical inquiry (Widiadi, 2022).

The Value Clarification Technique and Multicultural Education

The Value Clarification Technique (VCT) has emerged as a pedagogical approach relevant to multicultural education. VCT encourages reflective discussions that help students

explore personal values and consider diverse cultural perspectives (Akhwani & Nurizka, 2021; Bartelds et al., 2020; Conner & Graham, 2023; Dimici & Başbay, 2025; NISA et al., 2020). Research by (Hatmono et al., 2025) demonstrate that VCT-based teaching materials can enhance students' critical thinking and appreciation of cultural diversity by fostering an inclusive and reflective learning environment.

The effectiveness of VCT in history education has been documented in the Indonesian context. Studies have shown that VCT can effectively cultivate values of nationalism, democracy, and multiculturalism through history learning, accommodating both auditory and visual learning styles (Yudiana, 2020). The technique operates through characteristic steps: identifying values, choosing values freely from alternatives, prizing and affirming values, and acting upon values (Raths et al., 1978). This structured approach to value clarification provides a framework for helping students develop awareness of their own values and respect for diverse perspectives.

Method

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the integration of multicultural perspectives in history education at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to generate rich, contextualised understanding of educational practices as they unfold in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Unlike quantitative methods that privilege measurement and generalisation, qualitative inquiry enables researchers to explore the meanings that participants attach to their experiences, the tacit knowledge that shapes practice, and the complex interplay of factors that influence educational outcomes.

The case study design was specifically chosen for its appropriateness in examining contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin & Campbell, 2018). As an intrinsic case study, this research focuses on understanding the particular case of SMA Negeri 1 Lasem in its specificity, rather than seeking statistical generalisability (Stake, 1995). The intrinsic case study approach is appropriate when the case itself is of interest due to its unique characteristics, in this instance, the school's significant ethnic and religious diversity and its location in Lasem, a town with a complex history of inter-ethnic relations (Astuti et al., 2024; Atabik, 2016; Triatmodjo et al., 2023).

The selection of SMA Negeri 1 Lasem as the research site was purposive. The school's student body reflects significant diversity across ethnic (Javanese, Chinese Peranakan) and religious (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Confucianism) dimensions, making it an appropriate site for examining how multicultural perspectives are integrated in history education. The school's implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, with its explicit emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile and Global Diversity dimension, provided a relevant policy context for the investigation.

Data and Sources of Data

Data for this study were drawn from multiple sources to enable comprehensive understanding of multicultural perspectives integration. Primary data sources included three categories of informants. History teachers constituted the first category. Three history

teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem were selected for their experience teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum and their willingness to participate in extended inquiry. Teacher informants included both male and female teachers with varying years of teaching experience, providing diverse perspectives on curriculum implementation. Teacher interviews explored conceptualisations of multicultural education, instructional strategies employed, perceived challenges, and professional development needs.

Students constituted the second category of informants. Students from Grade X were selected to represent diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including students from Javanese and Chinese ethnic backgrounds and adherents of different religious traditions. Student selection was guided by teacher recommendations to ensure representation across backgrounds. Student interviews explored perceptions of history instruction, engagement with multicultural content, and awareness of multicultural values in their learning experiences.

School administrators, including the Vice Principal for Curriculum, constituted the third category of informants. Administrator perspectives provided insight into institutional policies, curriculum implementation strategies, and systemic challenges affecting multicultural education.

Classroom activities constituted a second major data source. Direct observation of history lessons across multiple sessions documented teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, student engagement patterns, and the enactment of curriculum expectations in practice. Observations focused on identifying instances where multicultural perspectives were addressed, the strategies employed, and student responses.

Documentary evidence constituted a third data source. Teaching modules (*Modul Ajar*), lesson plans, student worksheets, and assessment materials were collected and analysed to understand how multicultural values were articulated in formal curriculum documents. The School Operational Curriculum (*Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan*) provided insight into institutional commitments to multicultural education. Bibliometric analysis of multicultural education research in Indonesia has identified the importance of examining curriculum documents as sources of data for understanding how multicultural values are formally articulated (Fielding et al., 2024; Rowan & Wansink, 2025; Sampaleng, 2023).

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a structured period from January to February 2024, enabling concentrated engagement with participants and observation of multiple instructional sessions. The research team employed three principal data collection techniques.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their perspectives on multicultural education in depth. Interview protocols were developed to address the research questions while maintaining flexibility to pursue emergent themes. Teacher interviews explored conceptualisations of multicultural education, specific strategies for integrating multicultural perspectives, perceived obstacles, and professional development experiences. Student interviews investigated perceptions of multicultural content in history instruction, experiences of diversity in the classroom, and the relevance of multicultural learning to their lives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Non-participant observation of history lessons was conducted across multiple class sessions. The researcher observed instructional activities, teacher-student interactions, student engagement behaviours, and the explicit and implicit communication of multicultural values. Observation protocols focused on identifying how multicultural perspectives were introduced, the pedagogical strategies employed, and student responses. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the observation period.

Document analysis involved systematic collection and review of relevant documents. Teaching modules, lesson plans, student worksheets, and assessment materials were analysed to identify how multicultural values were articulated in formal curriculum documents. Document analysis focused on the alignment between stated curriculum objectives and observed practice, as well as the extent to which multicultural perspectives were systematically integrated into instructional materials. Bibliometric studies of multicultural education in Indonesia have demonstrated the value of systematic document analysis for understanding how multicultural values are represented in educational materials (Fielding et al., 2024).

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, this study employed multiple strategies aligned with qualitative research standards. Triangulation was pursued across sources, comparing data from teachers, students, administrators, and documents; and across techniques, cross-verifying observation, interview, and documentary evidence. This triangulation enabled identification of convergent patterns while also revealing tensions and contradictions that enriched understanding.

Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants and soliciting feedback on interpretations. This process helped ensure that researcher interpretations accurately reflected participant perspectives and enabled participants to correct misunderstandings or add nuance. The researcher maintained detailed field notes documenting contextual factors and reflexive observations throughout the research process.

Thick description of the setting, participants, and practices enables readers to assess the transferability of findings to other contexts. Detailed contextual information about the school, community, and educational policy environment supports informed judgment about applicability. The researcher documented the school's characteristics, the broader institutional and policy context, and the specific conditions shaping multicultural education at the site.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, thematic approach consistent with qualitative research conventions. The analysis process comprised several phases aligned with Miles et al.'s (2020) interactive model. Data reduction involved systematic review and condensation of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence. This process entailed identifying relevant passages, coding for thematic content, and organising data according to emerging categories. Initial codes were derived both from the theoretical framework (deductive coding) and from patterns emerging from the data (inductive coding). Codes were organised around the research questions, addressing

conceptualisations of multicultural education, implementation practices, obstacles, and student perceptions.

Data display organised condensed data into thematic matrices and narrative summaries to facilitate pattern identification and cross-case comparison. Displays enabled systematic examination of relationships between concepts, identification of convergent and divergent patterns, and testing of emerging interpretations against the full range of evidence. Data were organised around themes including teacher conceptions, pedagogical strategies, implementation obstacles, and student perspectives. The systematic review of multicultural education in Indonesia confirms that thematic analysis is appropriate for examining how multicultural values are conceptualised and implemented across educational contexts (Hagenaars et al., 2023).

Conclusion drawing and verification were conducted iteratively through constant comparison of data across sources and techniques. Emerging interpretations were tested against discrepant cases and alternative explanations. The researcher engaged in ongoing reflection on how personal assumptions and perspectives might shape data collection and interpretation. Final conclusions were grounded in the full range of evidence and subjected to member checking to enhance credibility.

Results

Teacher Conceptions of Multicultural Education

The study revealed that history teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem demonstrated awareness of multicultural education as a concept while holding varied and often superficial understandings of its implications for history pedagogy. Teachers consistently articulated multicultural education in terms of tolerance, respect for diversity, and the importance of treating all students equally regardless of their backgrounds. As one teacher explained, multicultural education involves "teaching tolerance and equality, and rejecting special treatment based on religious, ethnic, racial, cultural, or social class background." This understanding aligns with what Banks (2019) identifies as the prejudice reduction dimension of multicultural education, but it does not extend to the more demanding dimensions of knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, or transformative curriculum change. Teachers recognised that SMA Negeri 1 Lasem's student body was characterised by significant diversity across ethnic and religious dimensions. They noted the presence of students from Javanese and Chinese backgrounds and adherents of multiple religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This diversity was seen as both an opportunity and a responsibility. One teacher observed that "the diversity gives students direct opportunities to expand their knowledge" about different cultures and religious traditions. Another teacher noted that the school's diversity created conditions for "directly experiencing tolerance" rather than merely learning about it abstractly.

However, teachers' conceptions of multicultural education remained largely focused on behavioural outcomes rather than epistemological transformation. When asked about the goals of multicultural education in history, teachers emphasised developing students' "tolerance," "respect for differences," and "social harmony." They did not articulate goals related to developing critical historical consciousness, interrogating dominant narratives,

or understanding how knowledge is constructed. This finding is consistent with Sleeter's (2024) observation that multicultural education is often diluted to "getting along" or "celebrating diversity" while evading deeper engagement with power and structural inequality.

Teachers also demonstrated limited engagement with the specific features of the Merdeka Curriculum that could support multicultural education. While they mentioned the Pancasila Student Profile and its Global Diversity dimension, they could not articulate how this dimension translated into specific learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, or assessment practices. This gap between policy awareness and pedagogical understanding reflects broader challenges of curriculum implementation in Indonesia, where teachers receive insufficient professional development to translate reform mandates into practice (Kusumawati & Umam, 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024; Widayati et al., 2021). Bibliometric analysis of curriculum publications indexed in Scopus reveals that research on the Merdeka Curriculum has primarily focused on student-teacher experience and interaction, learning methods, and technology application, with less attention to multicultural dimensions (Sukma et al., 2025).

Integration of Multicultural Perspectives in Classroom Practice

The integration of multicultural perspectives in history classrooms at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem was characterised by what Banks (2019) would identify as the contributions and additive approaches, with limited evidence of transformation or social action approaches. Teachers employed several strategies to address multicultural dimensions in their instruction. Content integration was the most commonly observed strategy. Teachers reported and were observed including content about different cultural and religious groups in their history instruction. For example, in teaching about the entry of Hinduism and Buddhism into Indonesia, teachers discussed the theories of how these religions arrived and the evidence of their influence that persists today. Teachers also used examples from Lasem's own multicultural history, including the presence of Chinese Peranakan communities and the coexistence of different religious traditions. One teacher explained that "when discussing the Hindu-Buddha period, I ask students who are Hindu or Buddhist to share what they know, so other students get new insights through a direct source."

This practice of using students as "sources" represents an innovative attempt to make multicultural content more authentic and engaging. However, it also risks placing the burden of representation on minority students, who may feel pressure to speak for their entire community. The practice also does not necessarily lead students to examine how historical narratives are constructed or why certain perspectives have been marginalised. Analysis of multicultural values in Indonesian history textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum reveals that while some multicultural content is present, it often remains at the level of representation without critical engagement with knowledge construction (Santosa et al., 2024).

Discussion and debate were employed as pedagogical strategies to engage students with multiple perspectives. Teachers used group discussions and debates to enable students to express different viewpoints and learn to respect opposing opinions. One teacher noted that "during discussions, I act as a moderator to stop debates when they get too heated, preventing conflict." This approach reflects attention to prejudice

reduction but does not necessarily enable students to engage critically with the epistemological dimensions of historical knowledge.

Project-based activities provided additional opportunities for multicultural engagement. Teachers reported and were observed implementing projects aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, including activities related to democracy and civic participation. One notable example was a student council election project that provided opportunities for students to engage with principles of democratic participation. However, such projects appeared isolated rather than systematically integrated into the curriculum. Research on the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) indicates that while multicultural values and religious moderation can be integrated into such projects, implementation often faces challenges related to teacher understanding and resource availability (Rachman et al., 2024).

Assessment practices reflected limited attention to multicultural dimensions. While teachers reported assessing affective outcomes related to tolerance and respect, these assessments were informal and unsystematic. Assessment of multicultural understanding did not extend to evaluating students' capacity for perspective-taking, critical analysis of narratives, or understanding of knowledge construction. This finding is consistent with broader research on assessment challenges in multicultural education, where the affective and critical dimensions of multicultural learning are difficult to measure using conventional assessment approaches (Bartelds et al., 2020, 2023).

Obstacles to Effective Integration

The study identified several obstacles that impeded effective integration of multicultural perspectives in history education. These obstacles reflect both the specific challenges of multicultural education and broader constraints on curriculum implementation in Indonesian schools.

Absence of explicit curriculum mandates emerged as a primary obstacle. Teachers noted that multicultural education was not a separate subject and that curriculum documents did not explicitly require the integration of multicultural perspectives. As one teacher explained, "there is no curriculum that specifically regulates the cultivation of multicultural values." While the Pancasila Student Profile includes Global Diversity as a dimension, teachers did not receive clear guidance on how this dimension should be operationalised in history instruction. This absence of explicit mandates created ambiguity about expectations and reduced pressure to prioritise multicultural integration.

This finding is consistent with research on curriculum implementation in Indonesia, which has identified the gap between broad policy statements and specific implementation guidance as a persistent challenge (Rohmah et al., 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility, while intended to enable contextualisation, also creates uncertainty for teachers who lack the professional development and resources to design their own multicultural curricula. Evaluation of the Merdeka Curriculum through systematic literature review has identified implementation strategies, key challenges, and student learning outcomes as areas requiring further research (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024).

Time constraints constituted a second significant obstacle. Teachers reported that the pressure to cover extensive curriculum content, combined with large class sizes, limited

the time available for in-depth exploration of multicultural perspectives. One teacher noted that using Problem Based Learning, which enables deeper engagement with complex issues, required significant time that was not always available. This finding resonates with international research on multicultural history education, which has documented time constraints as a persistent barrier to diversifying curricula (Lidher et al., 2024; Mansfield, 2023).

Limited teacher professional development was a third obstacle. Teachers reported that they had not received adequate training on multicultural education or on how to integrate multicultural perspectives into history instruction. One teacher explained that they had to learn "independently and self-taught" about the Merdeka Curriculum and its implications for teaching. The absence of systematic professional development left teachers to make sense of multicultural education on their own, a process that Fullan (2025) identifies as fraught with the risk of superficial understanding. International research on culturally responsive teaching indicates that there is a significant need for professional development to equip teachers with the competencies needed for culturally responsive pedagogy (Castro, 2022; Ciampa & Reisboard, 2024).

Assessment challenges constituted a fourth obstacle. Teachers noted that affective learning, including multicultural attitudes and values, was "difficult to measure." This difficulty led to minimal systematic assessment of multicultural outcomes, which in turn reduced the seriousness with which multicultural objectives were pursued. This finding reflects broader challenges of assessing affective and value-based learning in education systems that prioritise cognitive outcomes (Oteng et al., 2023).

Limited instructional resources was a final obstacle. Teachers reported that they lacked adequate resources, including textbooks, teaching materials, and examples of best practice, to support multicultural history education. While some teachers developed their own materials, this required significant time and effort that not all teachers could invest. This finding is consistent with research on multicultural education in Indonesia, which has identified limited instructional resources as a persistent challenge (Mansfield, 2023). Research integrating local wisdom into school curricula suggests that culturally responsive resources can enhance cultural preservation, student engagement, and moral development (Druker-Ibáñez & Cáceres-Jensen, 2022; Popa, 2023).

Student Perceptions of Multicultural Learning

Student perceptions of multicultural learning at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem were generally positive, though they reflected the limitations of the integration approaches employed. Students reported appreciating the opportunity to learn about different cultures and religious traditions and recognised the importance of tolerance and respect for diversity.

One student, Marcellino, expressed that "from myself, I see differences as something ordinary, and respecting friends' opinions is also part of it. The key is to prioritise communication rather than using force in every problem." This statement reflects internalisation of tolerance values but does not necessarily indicate deeper engagement with multicultural perspectives or critical historical consciousness.

Students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds reported generally positive intergroup relations at the school. Chinese-Indonesian students described Javanese students as "good, polite, friendly, with high cultural values, teaching simplicity, patience, and kindness." Javanese students described Chinese-Indonesian students as generally

having "good personalities," though with some variation. This mutual respect reflects the effectiveness of the school's efforts to foster positive intergroup attitudes, consistent with the prejudice reduction dimension of multicultural education (Banks, 2019; Lindén et al., 2025).

However, student perspectives also revealed limitations in the depth of multicultural learning. When asked about what they learned in history, students focused primarily on content knowledge rather than on multicultural competencies or critical historical thinking. They did not articulate an understanding of how historical narratives are constructed, why certain perspectives are included or excluded, or how history relates to contemporary issues of diversity and inclusion. This finding suggests that the integration of multicultural perspectives in history instruction, while present, has not yet achieved the depth of transformation that would enable students to develop critical historical consciousness. Research on historical consciousness among Indonesian university students reveals that historical awareness varies based on ethnic background, suggesting the need for more inclusive and contextualised history education curricula (Popa, 2023; Santiago & Dozono, 2024).

Students also revealed limited awareness of the multicultural objectives of their history instruction. When asked whether teachers explicitly taught multicultural values, students described learning about tolerance and respect but did not identify these as deliberate learning objectives. This suggests that multicultural learning, while occurring, remains implicit rather than explicit, reducing its impact on student development.

Discussion

The Superficiality of Multicultural Integration

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between the aspirations of multicultural education and its realisation in history classrooms at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem. While teachers demonstrate commitment to fostering tolerance and inclusivity, multicultural integration remains superficial, characterised by what (Banks 2019) identifies as the contributions and additive approaches rather than the transformation or social action approaches that would enable genuine multicultural competence.

This superficiality manifests in several ways. First, multicultural content is added to the existing curriculum without changing its fundamental structure or assumptions. Teachers include content about different cultural and religious groups, but they do not enable students to examine how historical narratives are constructed, whose perspectives are included, and whose are marginalised. Second, multicultural learning focuses primarily on the prejudice reduction dimension, developing positive intergroup attitudes, without addressing the knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, or empowering school culture dimensions that Banks (2019) identifies as essential for transformative multicultural education. Third, multicultural learning remains implicit rather than explicit, with teachers not articulating multicultural objectives or assessing multicultural outcomes systematically.

This superficiality reflects broader patterns in multicultural education internationally. Sleeter (2024) observes that multicultural education has often been diluted from its original focus on eradicating racism and structural inequality to a celebration of diversity that

evades engagement with power. In the Indonesian context, this dilution is compounded by the persistence of transmission-oriented pedagogies, the absence of explicit curriculum mandates, and limited teacher professional development. Teachers are expected to foster tolerance and respect for diversity without the conceptual tools, pedagogical strategies, or institutional support needed for transformative practice. The bibliometric mapping of global trends in multicultural education curriculum confirms that while attention to diversity in education has increased, the depth of engagement with transformative dimensions remains variable (Lidher et al., 2024; Santiago & Dozono, 2022).

The Post-Colonial Dimensions of Multicultural Education in Indonesia

The challenges of multicultural integration in Indonesian history education must be understood within the country's post-colonial trajectory. Indonesia's history education system has been repeatedly shaped by state interests, from the New Order's instrumentalisation of history for state legitimation to contemporary efforts to balance national identity formation with critical citizenship (Pratama, 2022; Vickers, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile, with its Global Diversity dimension, represents an attempt to move beyond the instrumental approach while maintaining the nation-building function of education.

However, the tension between cultivating critical historical consciousness and inculcating prescribed values remains unresolved in practice. Teachers in this study emphasised nationalist values and behavioural compliance, including discipline and respect, while struggling to address the curriculum's more ambitious cognitive and ethical dimensions. This pattern reflects the tension between established curricular narratives and engagement with alternative historical perspectives (Pratama, 2022), where the reproduction of official history and prescribed values takes precedence over critical engagement with multiple perspectives.

The post-colonial context also shapes the specific manifestations of multicultural education in Indonesia. Unlike multicultural education in Western contexts, which often focuses on race and ethnicity, Indonesian multicultural education operates within a framework of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* that emphasises national unity while acknowledging diversity. This framework creates distinctive tensions: the need to acknowledge and respect diversity while maintaining national cohesion; the challenge of addressing historical injustices, including the marginalisation of Chinese-Indonesian communities and other minorities, within a narrative of national harmony; and the tension between religious pluralism and the dominance of Islam in public life.

These tensions were evident in the present study. Teachers emphasised tolerance and harmony while not addressing the structural inequalities and historical injustices that affect minority communities in Lasem and beyond. The complex history of Chinese-Indonesian communities in Lasem, including historical conflicts and the ongoing dynamics of ethnic relations, was not systematically addressed in history instruction. This silence reflects broader patterns in Indonesian history education, where difficult histories are often avoided in favour of narratives of national unity and progress (Stoddard, 2022; Vickers, 2023). Research on decolonising Indonesian history curriculum from 1946 to 1964 demonstrates that the process of decentring Eurocentric narratives has been complex and politically shaped, with implications for contemporary curriculum development (I. W. P. Utami et al., 2024).

Teacher Agency and Professional Development

The study reveals the central role of teacher agency in navigating the challenges of multicultural education. Teachers in this study were not passive recipients of reform but active agents who made sense of multicultural education, adapted it to their contexts, and developed strategies for addressing implementation obstacles. This finding aligns with research emphasising the importance of teacher agency in curriculum change, where teachers' interpretations, adaptations, and innovations shape implementation outcomes (Fullan, 2025; Pratama, 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

However, teacher agency operated within significant constraints. The absence of systematic professional development left teachers to make sense of multicultural education on their own, a process that Fullan (2025) describes as fraught with the risk of superficial understanding or misunderstanding. Teachers' reliance on self-directed learning and informal collegial sharing, while demonstrating initiative, could not compensate for the absence of structured professional development opportunities that would enable deeper engagement with the principles and practices of multicultural education.

The study also reveals the importance of professional development that is sustained, context-sensitive, and focused on pedagogical content knowledge. Research on effective professional development emphasises the need for ongoing support that addresses teachers' specific needs and contexts, rather than one-time workshops that provide general information without follow-up (Tuithof et al., 2023; Ventista & Brown, 2023). In the Indonesian context, professional development for multicultural education has been limited, with many teachers reporting insufficient preparation and support (Rohmah et al., 2024). Research on the future of Culturally Responsive Teaching in Indonesia suggests that CRT-oriented pedagogics are needed to develop relevant skills, yet implementation remains limited (Ratri et al., 2025; Susilo et al., 2023).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for policy and practice in multicultural history education. First, explicit curriculum guidance is needed to clarify expectations for multicultural integration. The Merdeka Curriculum's Pancasila Student Profile, while including Global Diversity as a dimension, does not provide sufficient guidance on how this dimension should be operationalised in history instruction. Developing clear learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches for multicultural history education would support more systematic integration.

Second, sustained professional development is essential for enabling teachers to implement multicultural education effectively. Teachers require opportunities to develop pedagogical content knowledge for multicultural history education, including understanding of Banks's five dimensions, strategies for engaging with multiple perspectives, and approaches for assessing multicultural learning. Professional development should be sustained, context-sensitive, and focused on practice, enabling teachers to experiment with new approaches and receive feedback and support.

Third, curriculum resources are needed to support multicultural history education. Teachers require access to diverse teaching materials, including primary sources from multiple perspectives, examples of best practice, and guidance on addressing difficult histories. Developing and disseminating such resources would reduce the burden on

individual teachers and support more consistent integration of multicultural perspectives. Research on integrating local wisdom into school curricula demonstrates that culturally responsive resources can enhance cultural preservation and student engagement (Druker-Ibáñez & Cáceres-Jensen, 2022; Mansfield, 2023).

Fourth, assessment reform is needed to better capture students' multicultural understanding and competence. Current assessment practices, which focus primarily on cognitive outcomes, do not adequately assess affective and critical dimensions of multicultural learning. Developing assessment approaches that capture students' capacity for perspective-taking, critical analysis of narratives, and understanding of knowledge construction would support more serious attention to multicultural objectives.

Fifth, critical engagement with post-colonial dynamics is essential for transformative multicultural education. Multicultural education in Indonesia must move beyond tolerance discourse to address the structural inequalities, historical injustices, and power dynamics that shape intergroup relations. This requires engagement with critical pedagogy, post-colonial theory, and the specific histories of marginalisation and resistance that have shaped Indonesian society. Research on the decolonisation of Indonesian history education emphasises the importance of decentring Eurocentric narratives and foregrounding national perspectives while acknowledging the complexities of historical interpretation (Santiago & Dozono, 2022; I. W. P. Utami et al., 2024; Vickers, 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a single-site case study, the findings are not statistically generalisable to other contexts, though they may offer insights applicable to similar Indonesian secondary schools. The relatively brief data collection period limited the depth of understanding that could be achieved; extended observation over a full academic year would enable richer understanding of how multicultural integration evolves over time. The study focused on teachers' and students' perspectives but did not include systematic analysis of curriculum documents at the national level, which would illuminate the policy context shaping multicultural education.

Future research should address these limitations through multi-site studies that examine multicultural integration across diverse Indonesian contexts, including schools with different demographic compositions, curriculum orientations, and institutional capacities. Longitudinal studies would enable understanding of how multicultural integration develops over time and what factors support or constrain its development. Comparative studies across post-colonial contexts would illuminate how different national histories and educational traditions shape the possibilities and challenges of multicultural education.

Additionally, research examining student learning outcomes more directly would strengthen understanding of whether and how multicultural history education influences student development of multicultural competence, historical consciousness, and civic engagement. Intervention studies testing specific pedagogical approaches to multicultural history education would provide evidence for effective practice. Research on the role of school leadership in supporting multicultural education would illuminate how leadership practices shape implementation outcomes. Bibliometric analysis of multicultural education research in international and Indonesian contexts suggests that future research

should explore the integration of multicultural perspectives across different educational levels and subject areas.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the integration of multicultural perspectives in history education under the Merdeka Curriculum at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem, revealing a significant gap between policy aspirations and classroom practice. Despite the curriculum's emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile and its Global Diversity dimension, multicultural integration remains superficial, characterised by tokenistic content inclusion without systematic engagement with the epistemological, pedagogical, and structural dimensions of transformative multicultural education.

Teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Lasem demonstrate commitment to fostering tolerance and inclusivity, yet their practice reflects the limitations of the contributions and additive approaches to multicultural education (Banks, 2019). Multicultural content is added to the existing curriculum without changing its fundamental structure or assumptions; multicultural learning focuses primarily on prejudice reduction without addressing knowledge construction or equity pedagogy; and multicultural objectives remain implicit rather than explicit, with limited systematic assessment.

The obstacles to effective multicultural integration reflect both the specific challenges of multicultural education and broader constraints on curriculum implementation in Indonesian schools. The absence of explicit curriculum mandates, limited teacher professional development, time constraints, assessment challenges, and limited instructional resources all constrain the depth and quality of multicultural integration. These obstacles are compounded by the post-colonial dynamics of Indonesian education, where the tension between cultivating critical historical consciousness and inculcating prescribed values remains unresolved.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Indonesian context. As educational systems across the Global South grapple with the challenge of preparing students for citizenship in diverse, post-colonial societies, understanding how multicultural education is conceptualised and implemented in specific institutional and cultural contexts becomes increasingly important. This study suggests that meaningful multicultural history education requires moving beyond tolerance discourse toward critical engagement with power, narrative construction, and the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge. It requires attention to all five dimensions of Banks's framework, not merely content integration and prejudice reduction. And it requires sustained investment in teacher professional development, curriculum resources, and institutional support.

Ultimately, this study argues that the integration of multicultural perspectives in history education represents both a significant opportunity and a profound challenge for Indonesian education. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile and its Global Diversity dimension signals a commitment to preparing students for life in a pluralistic society. However, realising this commitment requires more than policy mandates; it requires fundamental shifts in how teachers conceptualise history, knowledge, and the purposes of education. Without such shifts, multicultural education risks remaining a superficial addition to the curriculum, achieving tolerance without transformation, and diversity without justice.

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