Fostering Social Harmony and Minimizing Conflict Among Multi-ethnic Students Through Education in Semarang City

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Article Info

Abstract

Indonesia is characterized by a pluralistic society, encompassing a wide range of ethnicities and religions. Effectively managing this diversity is essential for fostering harmony and minimizing conflicts. One of the principal mechanisms for achieving this is through education. This study investigates the management of multi-ethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, focusing on social interactions and conflict resolution. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores the integration of multicultural education across intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities and students' interpretations of multicultural values. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation and analyzed utilizing Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism Theory. The findings indicate that educational institutions play a pivotal role in facilitating the understanding and appreciation of diversity by promoting positive interactions and respect for cultural differences among students. The interaction processes among multiethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang generate meanings associated with symbols such as multicultural values, friendship, religious celebrations, and language. These interpretations reflect a profound understanding of diversity. This supports Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which posits that the meanings individuals assign to objects influence their actions. Furthermore, schools actively endeavor to prevent and manage conflicts, thereby minimizing discord. The originality of this research lies in its exploration of structured multicultural education within schools, contributing to both social harmony and educational advancement in Indonesia. These findings offer broader implications for national education strategies to foster social cohesion.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, characterized by its rich multicultural tapestry, is home to diverse ethnicities, races, and cultures. This diversity is particularly pronounced in Semarang, a city renowned for its pluralistic society. The population comprises a heterogeneous mix of Javanese, Chinese, Arab, Malay, and other Indonesian ethnicities who have settled in Semarang for business, education, and permanent residence. While 20 of Semarang's sub-districts are predominantly inhabited by a single ethnic group, the remaining 157 are multi-ethnic (Statistics, 2021). However, this diversity also renders Semarang susceptible to conflicts. A notable instance occurred in 1980 when tensions between the Javanese and Chinese communities erupted following a smaller-scale disturbance involving Javanese students and Chinese youth in Surakarta. The situation rapidly escalated, causing substantial damage and jeopardizing the safety and tranquility of Semarang's residents (Wigarani & Witasari, 2019). In 2019, another incident involving racism and discrimination against Papuan students in Semarang highlighted the persistence of such issues. This event, triggered by a similar incident in Surabaya, resulted in attacks and racist slurs, leading to further unrest. These cases demonstrate how seemingly minor conflicts can escalate into larger-scale disturbances (Putro et al., 2017).

Considering the situation, it is essential to foster harmony among the diverse population; Semarang needs to cultivate a sense of unity based on Bhinneka Tunggal Ika's (Unity in Diversity) principles. This spirit promotes social cohesion, essential for building an integrated society. Education plays a crucial role in achieving this goal. By supporting pluralism, religious freedom, and human rights, education can serve as a democratic, equitable, and unbiased medium (Aricindy et al., 2022). James Banks, as cited in Ningsih et al. (2022), defines multicultural education as education about "people of color." It explores differences as an inevitable aspect of human society and encourages tolerance and egalitarianism. According to James Banks, there are five essential dimensions of multicultural education, namely: (1) Content Integration, which encourages education to reflect on various learning materials by focusing on key points that highlight diversity; (2) Knowledge Construction Process, where teachers assist students in understanding multiple perspectives and drawing conclusions based on the disciplines they have acquired; (3) Equity Pedagogy, which aims to create a fair school environment by providing equal learning opportunities for all students; (4) Empowering School Culture, which involves structuring the social system of the school to leverage the cultural diversity of students in social activities, extracurricular engagements, and staff-student interactions; and (5) Prejudice Reduction, which focuses on efforts by educators to help students develop positive behaviors towards group differences, addressing any prejudices or stereotypes through real intergroup interaction experiences.

Previous studies have examined initiatives in multicultural education within schools. Zumratun's research (2019) demonstrated positive, associative interactions among students of different ethnicities attributable to multicultural education. Additionally, Rizqiyawati's research (2020) investigated the implementation of multicultural values at Kuncup Melati Junior High School in Semarang, revealing that multicultural education effectively reduces conflict and stereotypes between ethnic groups of Javanese and Chinese students. Supporting this, the research of Aslan and Aybek (2020) highlighted the effectiveness of interdisciplinary education programs based on multicultural principles, showing a statistically significant increase in students' tolerance attitudes and critical thinking skills as evidenced by post-test results.

One of the schools in Semarang City that supports the implementation of multicultural education is Masehi 2 High School (SMA Masehi 2), a multiethnic school under the auspices of the Christian School and Dormitory Foundation (PSAK). SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang students consist of various ethnicities, including Javanese and non-Javanese (Chinese, Papuan, Batak, Dayak, and others). These multiethnic students undoubtedly bring their own unique cultures and characteristics. Therefore, the researcher is interested in exploring further the efforts of managing multiethnic students

at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang concerning student social interaction and conflict resolution.

This study can be framed within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which seeks to elucidate the meanings behind events or phenomena. In this paper, the author draws on Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes that the meanings individuals derive from their interactions serve as the foundation for their decision-making processes and subsequent actions.

This research contributes to multicultural education by addressing several novel aspects compared to previous studies. First, it explores the dynamics of multiculturalism in a multiethnic context, encompassing a broader range of ethnic groups, offering a more complex social perspective compared to studies focusing on a limited number of ethnicities. Additionally, the study investigates integral multicultural education, such as student interactions and conflict resolution. The specific context of a Christian-affiliated, multiethnic school further enhances the survey by adding a religious dimension to the examination of multicultural education. Finally, the application of symbolic interactionism offers a novel theoretical framework for understanding how multicultural education influences social behavior. Collectively, these elements fill existing literature gaps, particularly in scope and theoretical perspective.

This study examines how school management handles multiethnic students through curricular activities, analyzes students' interpretations of symbols of inter-ethnic social interaction, and the school's efforts in managing potential conflicts. Although several studies have highlighted the importance of multicultural education in school environments, only some have explored how inter-ethnic interactions are explicitly handled. This research is expected to fill this gap by examining the management strategies at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang in creating social cohesion among multiethnic students.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the researcher aims to uncover the hidden and unexplored phenomena in students' minds regarding their ethnic identities, specifically students of Javanese and non-Javanese ethnicity. Furthermore, the qualitative approach aligns with the symbolic interactionism theory used by the researcher as an analytical tool. This research focuses on the school's management of student activities as a platform for interaction among multi-ethnic students, the internalization of multicultural education values, the interpretation of social interaction symbols in the diversity of students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, and the school's management of potential conflicts.

This research was conducted at the school located at Jl. Gemah Raya No. 8, Gemah, Pedurungan District, Semarang City, Central Java. In this study, the researcher used three sources of data: informants, documents, and phenomena. Informants were selected using purposive sampling (targeted sampling). The study involved 17 informants, including the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and vice principal for student affairs as primary informants, along with six subject teachers (Sociology, Geography, Economics, Religious Studies, History, Pancasila Education, and Counseling) and eight students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Javanese, Papuan, Chinese, Batak, Muna, Sirikole, and Dayak, as supporting informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang. Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's framework, emphasizing triangulating data from various sources to ensure credibility. The Miles and Huberman approach emphasizes the importance of a systematic and reflective data analysis process, enabling researchers to understand the phenomenon under study deeply (Rijali, 2019). This approach consists of three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involves selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data collected in the field by filtering, summarizing, and organizing relevant information. Data display, which can include graphs, tables, or narrative texts, aims to present the collected information clearly and comprehensively. Conclusion drawing occurs gradually and is continuously verified throughout the research to ensure its validity, while further

analysis is conducted to explore the meaning and implications of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Managing Multicultural Education for Multiethnic Students

SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, a private institution under the Christian Religious Foundation, is not exclusively reserved for Christian students; it also welcomes individuals from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. According to data collected by the researcher for the 2023/2024 academic year, the school has 89 students, with 68.54% identifying as Christian, while both Catholic and Muslim students represent 15.73% each. The student body is ethnically diverse, with the majority being Javanese (40.45%), followed by Papuan students (24.72%). Other ethnic groups include Chinese (13.48%), Javanese-Chinese descendants (12.36%), and Batak (5.62%). Minority ethnic groups, such as Dayak, Sirikole, and Muna, are each represented by one student, constituting 1.12% of the total student population per group.

This diversity is both a valuable asset and a distinctive school characteristic. However, it may pose challenges to national integration if not managed effectively. To address this, the school actively manages various activities within the school environment to promote the internalization of multicultural education and facilitate interaction among its multiethnic student body. These activities encompass intra-curricular activities (formal learning experiences such as subject instruction and time allocation), co-curricular activities (activities conducted outside formal class hours that support intra-curricular learning), and extracurricular activities (designed to nurture students' talents and interests). Interaction is pivotal in cultivating students' capacity to live harmoniously in diverse groups and apply multicultural values in their everyday lives.

a. Intra-curricular

The internalization of multicultural education in intra-curricular activities at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang is achieved by embedding multicultural values into various subjects, particularly within the social sciences, including Geography, Sociology, Economics, History, Pancasila Education, Religious Education, and Guidance and Counseling. Classroom instruction is crucial in educating students about the diversity in Indonesia and their immediate environment while providing opportunities to practice multicultural living through direct and indirect experiences. Teaching, in this context, can be understood as a deliberate effort by educators to facilitate student learning, with learning itself defined as a process of behavioral transformation through experiential engagement (Atmaja, 2019).

Although multicultural education has not yet been established as a standalone subject in Indonesia, its implementation at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, through its integration into teaching and learning activities, meets the dimensions of multicultural education as outlined by James A. Banks, including content integration and knowledge construction. In addition to embedding multicultural values within the curriculum, teachers also serve as role models by directly or indirectly demonstrating attitudes and behaviors that reflect these values. As mentors, teachers are viewed as more experienced and knowledgeable, thus critical in setting a positive example for students (Ruth et al., 2023).

b. Co-curricular

SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang has integrated the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5) into its co-curricular activities, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum. This initiative focuses on three primary themes. The first theme is "The Voice of Democracy," implemented through the "Voice Your Rights!" project. This theme aims to cultivate democratic values among students, such as freedom of expression, respect for diversity, and open communication. By engaging in democratic practices, students develop the skills necessary to participate meaningfully in society (Maulana et al., 2024). According to Gorski (in Rufaida, 2017), this goal aligns with the goal of multicultural education, which is to make students socially aware and active as local, national, and global citizens.

The second theme is Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, implementing the "Live In" activity, which involves students living with residents in the Kandri Gurungpati Village in Semarang City. The live-in

activity allows students to learn about the values and social norms of the local community, increase social sensitivity, enhance independence, and foster a sense of care and empathy.

The third theme is local wisdom. Through the "Panen Raya" project, this theme celebrates local culture and heritage. By creating and sharing traditional recipe books, students gain a deeper understanding of their cultural identity and appreciate the diversity of other cultures.

c. Extra-curricular

The school organizes various programs for extracurricular activities designed to support students' potential, interests, and talents. These extracurricular offerings include futsal, basketball, journalism, music, flag-raising troops, scouting, and informatics. Students from all ethnic backgrounds have equal rights and opportunities to register and participate in these activities.

Implementing extracurricular activities aligns with the dimensions of multicultural education defined by James A. Banks, particularly the dimension of school cultural empowerment. This dimension is instrumental in fostering the cultural identities of multicultural students. Extracurricular activities complement the core curriculum, providing a dynamic and enriching environment for character development (Haensly in Masnawati et al., 2023). Moreover, these activities offer students opportunities to learn conflict management, collaborate effectively in teams or groups, and cultivate positive peer relationships (Kurniawan et al., 2022). In a multicultural setting, extracurricular activities facilitate integrating multiethnic students into groups with shared interests and goals, promoting inclusivity regardless of differences.

The internalization of multicultural education at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang—across intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities—is accessible to all students, ensuring equity and fairness in educational experiences. The interactions that occur during these activities also serve to diminish ethnocentrism and contribute to the reduction of prejudice. This assertion is corroborated by research conducted by Ikhsan and Tondok (2023), which indicates that interethnic contact can effectively reduce social prejudice and ethnocentrism.

Multi-Ethnic Students' Interpretation of Social Interaction Symbols

The social interactions among multiethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, facilitated through various school activities—including intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs—cultivate a dynamic social environment. All social relationships, whether operational, cooperative, or non-cooperative, arise from individual interactions (Hansen & Lárusdóttir, 2021). Students' experiences of social interaction are diverse, and each individual's response to or decision to act in a social context is influenced by their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the event. This notion that individual meanings or interpretations shape actions aligns with the symbolic interactionism theory proposed by Herbert Blumer. Interaction among individuals is facilitated through the discovery of meaning and the utilization of symbols, which, according to Blumer, can be physical, social, or abstract objects. This study explores the interpretations of multiethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang, focusing on social constructs such as friendship and abstract concepts like multicultural values, religious ceremonies, and language. Based on interviews with student informants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the interpretations of these constructs tend to be positive and supportive of harmony.

Almost all students express similar views regarding multicultural values, perceiving differences as natural and enriching to cultural diversity. The researcher found that nearly all informants acknowledged prior exposure to diverse cultures and multicultural experiences within their home environments and families before attending SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang. Their direct experiences in multicultural settings facilitated a deeper understanding of varied perspectives and values and the application of mutual respect for differences within the school environment. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Dias et al. (2020), which demonstrated that exposure to diverse cultures enhances individuals'

intercultural competence, enabling them to recognize cultural differences and adapt and thrive in multicultural contexts.

Concerning religious ceremonies, the tolerance exhibited at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang is evident in the respect and appreciation shown for ethnic and religious diversity. Although the school operates under a Christian foundation, students of other faiths are not required to participate in religious activities organized by the institution. For instance, during the Easter celebration, Muslim students contributed to the preparations for the event despite not participating in the religious ceremony itself.

When exploring friendships, the researcher discovered initial hesitations among students regarding befriending individuals from certain ethnic groups. This sentiment was articulated by J (a Chinese informant), who initially expressed concern about forming friendships with Papuan students due to prevalent stereotypes depicting Papuans as rough and aggressive. However, these apprehensions were alleviated as students interacted and became better acquainted. Friendships developed within the school environment significantly influence ethnic attitudes over time. Intra-ethnic ingroup friendships reinforce positive attitudes toward one's identity and culture. In contrast, inter-ethnic outgroup friendships contribute to reducing prejudice and enhancing tolerance toward other groups (Pehar et al., 2024).

Concerning language, non-native Javanese-speaking students recognize Bahasa Indonesia as a unifying language that facilitates communication with peers from various ethnic backgrounds. Bahasa Indonesia promotes effective communication and eases social interactions in daily activities, thereby minimizing conflicts arising from regional language differences and fostering an atmosphere of harmony (Chairunnisa et al., 2022). Related to regional language, the study identified divergent interpretations of regional languages among students. During the initial phase of interaction, Papuan students perceived the language of Javanese students as indirect, overly verbose, and slow-paced. In contrast, Javanese students characterized the language of Papuan students as harsh, loud, and indicative of anger. However, following a period of interaction and mutual understanding, these initial perceptions diminished, and students expressed an interest in learning each other's languages.

Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism, which explains the students' interpretations of these symbols, can serve as a foundation for decision-making. The understanding and interpretations derived from social interactions form the basis for decision-making, influencing whether individuals respond constructively or otherwise to differences. Blumer (Grifin et al., 2019) posits that symbolic interactionism is grounded in three primary premises.

The first premise asserts that humans act based on the meanings that objects hold for them. Students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds arrive at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang with pre-existing social interaction experiences and an understanding of various contexts. These multi-ethnic students bring an initial comprehension of their cultural backgrounds, which informs their actions when engaging with others in the school environment.

The second premise posits that the meaning of an object emerges from social interactions. Interactional spaces among students of different ethnicities within school activities facilitate students' understanding of multicultural values, leading to the formation of new meanings or the reinforcement and evolution of existing ones.

The third premise states that the meanings acquired are subject to modification through an interpretive process. An object's significance is inherently dynamic; creative and interpretive individuals can reshape its meaning. Each student, drawing from their unique ethnic backgrounds, can reinterpret these meanings through reflection and interpretation, enabling them to make decisions and take actions that promote harmony and social integration within the school community.
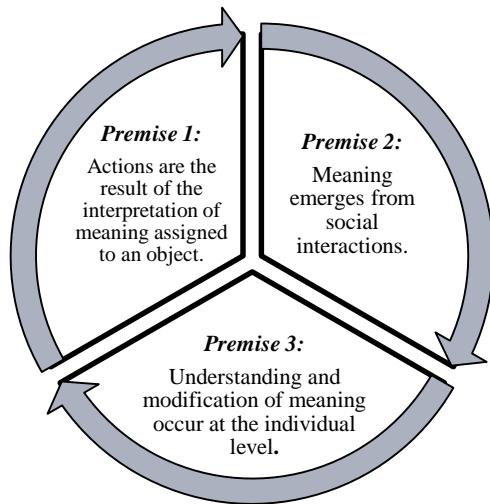
Figure 1. Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory

Figure 1 illustrates that Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory's three premises can engender a recurring cycle. In this cycle, an individual's meanings and understandings are not static but dynamic. These meanings can be reinterpreted or modified in response to stimuli such as novel environments, new experiences, or particular social contexts.

From an emic perspective, students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang interpret symbols in their social interactions through the lens of their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. The meanings attributed to social constructs such as multicultural values, friendships, language, and religious ceremonies are shaped by students' exposure to diverse cultures and their ethnic identities. For instance, students view multicultural values positively, perceiving cultural differences as enriching based on their upbringing in a multicultural environment. Similarly, initial stereotypes about language and ethnicity, such as viewing the Javanese language as slow-paced or the Papuan language as harsh and the perception among Chinese students that Papuans are anarchic, evolve as students engage more with their peers. This interaction leads to a deeper understanding and interest in each other's cultures. The meaning-making process is dynamic, as initial interpretations of social symbols, like language or friendship, are influenced by students' cultural backgrounds but are subject to modification through continued interaction with peers from different ethnic groups.

Managing Conflict Potential

The heterogeneous environment at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang creates conditions that are inherently prone to conflict. The potential for conflict exists continuously, whether between individuals or groups. Such conflicts may arise from negative stereotypes about specific ethnic groups, ethnocentrism (excessive pride in one's ethnicity coupled with the devaluation of others), or bullying based on cultural or physical differences. Proactive conflict management strategies are essential to prevent these conflicts from escalating and disrupting students' educational progress. Should conflict arise, it must be addressed effectively through appropriate resolution mechanisms.

Conflict prevention efforts at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang involve integrating multicultural values—such as tolerance, equality, and harmony—into intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. By engaging students in learning experiences and real-life interactions with peers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the school aims to foster an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, encouraging students to recognize, acknowledge, and respect diversity. Preventative strategies include (1) involving students in establishing class agreements, (2) facilitating group discussions, (3) organizing cultural performances, and (4) promoting anti-bullying declarations. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering student involvement in classroom agreements and group discussions, promoting unity and shared responsibility regardless of ethnic background. Group discussions, particularly among ethnically diverse students, encourage communication and interaction, enhancing understanding of multicultural challenges (Tropp et al., 2022). The guidance and counseling teachers address interpersonal issues and support students facing conflict. In collaboration with the school leadership, the student affairs vice principal organizes cultural performances and anti-bullying declarations. Cahya et al. (2023 found that cultural performances can reduce ethnocentrism, broaden cross-cultural perspectives, and promote social cohesion by preserving cultural heritage. Anti-

bullying programs, as evidenced by Sainz & Martín-Moya (2022), enhance school safety, reduce conflicts, and foster a more inclusive environment.

Despite these proactive measures, minor conflicts are inevitable in social interactions. Based on interviews and observations, the researcher found that the disputes among the multi-ethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang were primarily personal, occurring between individuals rather than rooted in ethnic or racial differences. These conflicts did not involve physical violence and were not triggered by ethnic identity differences. The research also identified instances of student disagreements that required intervention. Conflict resolution at the school was managed through mediation and counseling services.

CONCLUSION

The school plays a pivotal role in managing intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, serving as a platform for interaction among multi-ethnic students while fostering the internalization of multicultural values. Through these structured social interactions, students develop a deeper comprehension of diversity, which promotes more thoughtful and informed responses to differences. The process of social interaction among multiethnic students at SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang is consistent with Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory. In this process, social contact and communication create meanings associated with symbols or objects, such as multicultural values, friendships, religious holidays, and language. These meanings are not fixed; they can be reinterpreted and modified through a cognitive process, where individuals reflect on their own experiences (self-indication) and adjust their understanding, which in turn influences their decisions and actions in social situations. Interaction facilitates mutual understanding, diminishes prejudice, and fosters cooperation and collaboration. Moreover, the study reveals that, besides the school's multicultural education efforts, external factors such as the backgrounds of multi-ethnic students—some already accustomed to multicultural environments—significantly contribute to creating a harmonious school atmosphere. SMA Masehi 2 PSAK Semarang also implements proactive conflict prevention and resolution strategies, further ensuring a safe, inclusive, and harmonious environment with minimal conflict, even within a context of diversity.

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