



The Interaction Patterns Between Malay and Javanese Students in a Multicultural School Environment

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Abstract

In a multicultural society, interaction between ethnic groups plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion. Schools, as a small representation of a diverse culture, play a strategic role in fostering social harmony among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This study aims to describe and analyze patterns of social interaction between Malay and Javanese students in a multicultural school environment, particularly in a transmigration area. The primary focus of the study is patterns of social interaction, the factors that influence them, and the role of schools in fostering cross-cultural social integration. The research approach used was a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving students, teachers, and the principal. The results indicate that interactions between Malay and Javanese students still tend to be structured along ethnic lines. This pattern reflects a tendency toward exclusivity in social interactions. Factors such as differences in language and cultural habits, unequal participation in school activities, and the uneven implementation of inclusive policies contribute to limited cross-cultural interaction. Thus, education is expected to function not only as a means of recognising diversity, but also as a vehicle for fostering social harmony in the school environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as an archipelagic nation with extraordinary cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. This diversity is not only evident in the general public but also in education, particularly in schools located in multicultural areas. In such regions, schools serve as meeting places for students from various cultural backgrounds, including malay and javanese students in the transmigration area of mesuji district, ogan komering ilir regency

The presence of these two large ethnic groups creates quite interesting social dynamics. Each brings its own values and perspectives that influence daily interactions. For example, javanese society is portrayed as hierarchical and symbolic, while malay society tends to be more egalitarian and family-oriented. The combination of the two blends into the daily lives of people in this area; interaction between ethnic groups is unavoidable because they live in the same area.

In situations like this, multicultural education becomes a critical approach. Multicultural education is rich in models and concepts. However, unfortunately, many focus on only one dimension. Some focus solely on ethnicity, religion, tribe, or other factors (Purwasari, 2023). The goal of multicultural education is to create equal learning opportunities while fostering cross-cultural understanding so that students can live harmoniously amidst diversity. Schools, with all their dynamics, have a significant responsibility to ensure healthy, respectful interactions among students. Furthermore, at school, students gain valuable insights into cultural, linguistic, and other differences that are an inevitable part of their social lives.

The role of teachers is also highly strategic. Teachers are not only instructors but also collaborative facilitators in creating spaces for intercultural dialogue. Despite technical challenges, teachers' adaptive strategies can maintain an inclusive and meaningful learning process (Suparyadi et al., 2025). The integration of multicultural values into education will help students develop positive attitudes toward diversity and foster respect for differences (Wibowo, 2024). Once students' character has been developed,

potential negative external influences can be better managed and resolved than if they lack the understanding and character to accept differences.

The interaction between malay and javanese students can be seen as a constantly evolving social process. Broader social factors, such as stereotypes, also play a role. Stereotypes are not merely viewed as a social issue but are also often linked to intercultural communication issues. Intercultural communication instruction often focuses on one cultural group as distinct from another (Bahry et al., 2024). Differences in language, economic background, or communication style can also lead to minor miscommunications in schools. Sometimes, minority groups feel less recognised because the majority culture is often used as a reference. Stereotypes are inevitable in a multicultural society; what makes the difference is how the community responds and is willing to open itself to other cultures, which will foster positive communication and reduce prejudice between groups.

Furthermore, geographical factors and the history of transmigration contribute regions, the Javanese are known as an immigrant group active in government and education, while the Malays serve as the indigenous population, maintaining local traditions. This inequality can create a perception gap, especially if schools do not serve as a fair cultural bridge for all parties. People with a Javanese cultural background have a worldview that prioritises the future, so many choose to provide the best possible education for their children. Some also possess the skills that their communities trust them to use to participate in leadership roles in their regions actively. If this is not balanced with positive acceptance from the indigenous ethnic group, it can lead to social jealousy. On the other hand, Javanese people, as immigrants, must also be able to establish positive communication with the indigenous community.

In the digital age, social media adds a new layer to student interactions. These platforms can be a positive space for cross-cultural networking, but they can also reinforce stereotypes if not properly guided. Therefore, schools play a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives to be more open and critical, both in the real world and in the digital

space. Social media is highly popular among adolescent students, who enjoy exploring themselves and their peers through posts. Without proper filtering, it can lead to negative prejudice, since people's interpretations of a post vary.

The implementation of multicultural education is not limited to classroom theory. Mukhtar Syafa'at Middle School has a diverse student body and teachers, comprising ethnic Malays and their sub-ethnicities as natives and Javanese as immigrants. Therefore, multicultural values need to be reflected in school policies, including establishing and fostering an inclusive school environment, learning methods such as forming cross-cultural study groups, and how teachers treat students from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as addressing student problems using a cross-cultural approach. School programs and activities can support the development of multicultural understanding, for example, through cultural introduction programs, cross-cultural dialogue, or extracurricular activities (Juwarno, 2025). The sustainability of school programs is crucial to the success of efforts to create a school environment open to all cultures. This will impact student interaction patterns, making them more fluid and less rigid, thus preventing undesirable aspects such as primordialism.

Therefore, examining interaction patterns between Malay and Javanese students in multicultural schools is highly relevant. Such studies not only enrich theory but also provide direction for more inclusive education policies. Schools, as a model of Indonesian society, should serve as role models for building a harmonious social life amidst diversity. Schools equip students to live in a multicultural society and address the challenges that arise in such environments.

The situation is exciting in transmigration areas. In these areas, the community consists of indigenous peoples, such as Malays, and transmigrant groups, such as Javanese. Schools serve as crucial spaces where students learn to live together, understand one another, and forge new identities as a community. Although challenges such as group exclusivity or differing values still arise, schools have the potential to become real multicultural laboratories. With an inclusive

approach and activities that encourage cross-cultural collaboration, schools in this region can serve as examples of successful social integration in Indonesia.

The problem that emerges from the background description is the suboptimal management of social interactions between Malay and Javanese students in multicultural schools, particularly those located in transmigration areas. There is still a tendency towards ethnic exclusivism, differences in cultural values that are not effectively bridged, and a lack of integration of multicultural education into daily school practices. Without appropriate educational interventions, these differences can reinforce stereotypes and social conflict. Therefore, an in-depth study is needed to understand the interaction patterns that form, the language barriers, and the role schools can play in building harmony and social integration between ethnic groups in the educational environment.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was chosen with a collective case study research design. This design is used when the case under study consists of several cases, with typical characteristics obtained through the individual cases studied. This article describes and analyses the social interaction patterns of Malay and Javanese students in a multicultural school environment, necessitating a collective case study design.

Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School, Suka Mukti Village, Mesuji District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency, served as the research location. Suka Mukti Village is one of the transmigration villages in the district, which influences the social and cultural life of its residents. Transmigration creates a community that blends local and immigrant communities. Transmigrants bring their own cultures from their regions of origin. Not only do they encounter different local cultures, but the cultures they bring with them also differ by region of origin. Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School also has a similar community mix, with students and teachers coming from transmigration families, residents, and students from outside the region, predominantly Malay and Javanese. The research period lasted two months, from July to August 2025.

Three data collection techniques were used: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Eleven informants were recruited. Two homeroom teachers served as primary informants, four eighth-grade students, and four ninth-grade students. The key informant was the principal of Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School. This paper examines the social interaction patterns of Malay and Javanese students in a multicultural school environment. Multicultural education encompasses not only ethnicity and race but also the recognition of the values of cultural diversity, acceptance of others' choices, social justice, and equality for all.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Student Interaction Patterns In Multicultural Schools

Social interactions in multicultural schools reflect the diversity of the wider society, marked by ethnic, cultural, and value differences. In transmigration areas, such as those involving Malay and Javanese students, these interactions present unique challenges. Issues of cultural identity, stereotypes, and social adaptation processes often occur, which are not always smooth. Sometimes, differences in values and norms between groups create awkward relationships between students and can even become a barrier to building togetherness. However, considering the impact, togetherness is a cornerstone of sustainable social interactions among students in multicultural schools. If gaps exist in student interactions, this can lead to several cultural problems, such as negative stereotypes and heightened primordialism. When students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds interact in multicultural schools, they bring different cultural values. These values can include beliefs, norms, traditions, and attitudes toward those of different ethnicities. Social interactions in schools serve as a forum where these cultural values converge and influence one another. Therefore, maintaining togetherness and harmony is crucial (Imam Wahyudin et al., 2024).

This togetherness needs to be built on a foundation of shared understanding and implemented sustainably. A seventh-grade student from a Javanese family explained that he received support from his school community to adapt. He

was not assigned to a dormitory with people from the same background, but was instead given the freedom to choose friends regardless of their background. This echoed the explanation of an eighth-grade student from a Malay family. He explained that helping new students at his school is an established and ongoing habit. He believes that the initial arrival time is a determining factor in whether students will settle in, as he experienced when he first started school, receiving help from his peers to adapt.

Javanese society is known for its hierarchical, symbolically structured social structure, while Malay society emphasises values of equality and a sense of family. This difference in perspective undoubtedly impacts social patterns at school. Students often choose to interact with friends from similar cultural backgrounds, which leads to the formation of small ethnic groups. Segregation has the potential to escalate into future conflict if there is a lack of mutual trust and interaction, and this presents a challenge to overcome (Kunarsih & Tampilen, 2022). Mukhtar Syafa'at Middle School also faces similar challenges. Although students at this school are encouraged to develop a sense of togetherness during the adaptation phase, in practice, several incidents still lead to disputes between students, such as those who defend their peers from the same region when they are involved in a dispute with students from another region without fully understanding the underlying issues.

Another problem arises when multicultural values have not been fully integrated daily educational practices. While Indonesian education conceptually supports diversity, in reality, many schools still fail to instill a spirit of inclusivity in their policies or learning methods. Students must be taught to understand all types of knowledge and actively discuss knowledge construction and differing interpretations (Purwasari, 2023). The integration of multicultural education can make a significant contribution to students' lives by helping them develop attitudes of mutual respect and acceptance toward the differences they encounter (Salma et al., 2025). Multicultural education goes beyond simply recognizing differences; it must also actively combat inequality and discrimination. If

schools fail to provide a safe space for all students, the potential for social conflict will persist, albeit in subtle forms. Schools, which should be child-friendly environments, can become unsafe if they are characterized by exclusivity, with numerous barriers that limit social interaction between students.

At the institutional level, multicultural education management training is expected to raise educators' awareness of its importance. This awareness is crucial so educators can actively contribute to creating a learning environment that respects cultural diversity (Nurmalina, Raudatussaadah, 2025). This is crucial because failing to do so can result in sensitive issues related to cultural identity being overlooked. When this happens, stereotypes easily form, and cross-cultural communication becomes less effective. However, schools in transmigration areas have significant potential. With diverse student backgrounds, schools can become authentic social learning platforms where children learn to appreciate differences and collaborate across cultures. Strengthening character education through school culture, character content in the implementation of PPK (Strengthening Character Education) is implemented through the curriculum and in the context of elementary and secondary schools. School culture must foster a tolerant character from the beginning of school (Hidayat & Kurniawan, 2024).

Ultimately, interactions between Malay and Javanese students at Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School are not solely determined by cultural factors, but also by how the education system responds to diversity itself. The solution goes beyond a social approach and also involves policy reform and increased teacher capacity to build a truly equitable learning environment that respects differences. Some implemented policies are already moving in a positive direction, such as not grouping students with similar backgrounds in one dormitory, but rather allowing them the freedom to interact with all students and other school members regardless of ethnicity or culture.

Factors Influencing Multicultural Student Interactions

The author's findings indicate that in interethnic relationships, language is often a significant factor in student interactions in a multicultural environment. Language acts as both a bridge and a barrier; for example, students from Malay and Javanese ethnicities have different mother tongues. Although Indonesian is used as the official language at school, differences in dialect and speaking habits still arise in everyday conversation. Sometimes, even slight differences in tone or word choice can lead to misunderstandings or awkwardness. Multicultural education must seriously consider students' backgrounds, including language. If this linguistic diversity is not managed correctly, the risk of social exclusion will increase (Nanda & Nopriansyah, 2025). Language is a crucial factor in students' daily interactions at Mukhtar Syafa'at Middle School. Differences in mother tongue and dialect, if not addressed wisely, can cause friction, as seen in the following interview with a seventh-grade student: "I once felt like I was being talked about because I saw other students from different regions chatting nearby, because I didn't understand many of the languages they used. But over time, we became closer as we learned each other's languages, and we no longer felt suspicious.

Beyond language, cultural representation in schools also plays a significant role in shaping students' perspectives on diversity. Unfortunately, not all schools provide equal space for all cultures. In activities such as art performances or national day celebrations, the majority culture, in this case one ethnic group, is more prominent and prioritised than the other, which only appears briefly. This situation indirectly creates the impression that one culture is "predominant" over another. Multiculturalism emphasises the importance of providing inclusive and equitable cultural representation to students. This aims to ensure that students from diverse cultural backgrounds feel recognised and represented in the learning process (Miranti et al., 2024). Multicultural education is an educational approach that emphasizes the importance of fostering ways of living that uphold respect, honesty, and tolerance toward cultural diversity within a highly heterogeneous society (Hartono et al., 2024).

The family environment also plays a crucial role in shaping children's attitudes toward differences. Children who grow up in families with an open view of diversity tend to interact more easily across cultures. However, in transmigration areas, lingering social tensions between indigenous and immigrant communities, inherited from previous generations, often persist. The family environment also significantly influences students' attitudes toward diversity. Children who grow up in families with narrow or intolerant views of differences tend to carry these values into school (Asrofi et al., 2025). This was a miserable experience in the community surrounding Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School, where there was a clash between immigrants and indigenous communities that resulted in injuries. Although it did not occur within the school grounds, the story of the incident was still widely heard within the school community.

Teachers also play a key role in maintaining classroom harmony. Teachers who understand the principles of multicultural education can act as mediators and facilitators, fostering dialogue between students. Unfortunately, many teachers have not received specific training in this area. The topic of multiculturalism rarely appears in teacher education curricula, leaving many educators unprepared to design learning that is sensitive to students' ethnic and cultural diversity. As a social studies teacher explained in an interview, multicultural education should not be confined to a single subject, such as social studies. However, it can also be integrated into other subjects, especially given the critical need for a multicultural school environment. The role of teachers in implementing multicultural education is a crucial factor in creating a tolerant and inclusive school environment (Hamzah Pulungan et al., 2023).

Therefore, developing school programs that encourage cross-cultural collaboration is crucial. Community service activities have demonstrated significant results in improving teachers' and students' capacity to understand and implement cross-cultural communication-based learning. This program is designed to address the challenges of education in the era of globalisation, where cross-cultural communication skills are a key competency

for students. Through an integrated approach that includes teacher training, instructional media development, and intensive student mentoring, this activity can foster a more adaptive, contextually relevant learning transformation (Tambunan et al., 2025). Activities such as group projects, community service, or joint social activities can be effective ways to foster solidarity. Schools that cultivate students working together to solve problems and make decisions together are more inclusive and harmonious. Therefore, schools should not rely solely on formal rules but also build a tangible cultural strategy into students' daily lives an approach that makes differences feel not as boundaries but as a shared strength.

The Role of Schools in Building Cross-Cultural Social Integration

Efforts to foster harmonious interethnic interactions in schools are inseparable from school policies that truly support inclusivity. Schools that embrace a multicultural vision and incorporate it into their management strategies are more likely to foster an open social atmosphere. Schools are students' first exposure to and understanding of multicultural education. Therefore, schools need to design a multicultural education model with strategies of tolerance, cross-cultural communication, cooperation, and mutual respect (Ridwanuloh et al., 2024). Such policies provide a crucial foundation for creating a school culture of mutual respect. These policies, of course, need to be balanced with sustainable implementation, not just at the policy level but also within the school community's activities.

The implementation of Bhineka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity) and Pancasila in schools is evident in the signs and symbols displayed throughout the school. These signs and symbols significantly shape students' understanding of themselves as Indonesian citizens (Yanti & Sahrina, 2024). However, not all schools can implement this consistently. Many schools have written diversity values into their vision and mission statements, but their implementation in practice often remains ceremonial. For example, ceremonies or commemorations of national holidays fail to showcase the school's cultural diversity. Multicultural policies provide fundamental

guidelines for creating an environment that supports diversity and fosters a high level of tolerance. These principles include, among others, recognizing diversity (in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity, and background) and valuing the contributions brought by each group (Hikmah Hasanuddin, 2024). Many educational institutions in Indonesia still implement multicultural education symbolically, as a mere formality, without truly transforming the school community's organisational culture and mindset. As a result, some students from certain ethnic groups still feel marginalised in school social activities.

The school cultural festival and peer buddy activities are two activities at Mukhtar Syafaat Middle School that reflect the school's role in fostering cross-cultural social integration. The annual cultural festival at Mukhtar Syafaat Middle School is the endog-endogan parade, in which students showcase diverse cultures from various regions. Besides being a festival, the endog-endogan parade represents the cultural diversity present at the junior high school. Peer support is also a key component of this school's program, fostering cross-cultural social integration, particularly outside the classroom. Students who have adapted to a multicultural environment accompany and mentor students while in the dormitory. Cross-ethnic friendships often serve as a bridge to fostering mutual understanding. Students accustomed to working with peers from diverse backgrounds tend to be more tolerant and less susceptible to stereotypes. Educational programs must foster understanding, solidarity, and tolerance among individuals, groups, and nations. Therefore, teachers should design classroom activities that encourage cross-group collaboration rather than being based solely on ethnic proximity (Aparato & Zaman, 2025).

Beyond policy factors, students' psychological well-being also plays a significant role. This kind of pressure can lead to feelings of inferiority, reluctance to participate, or even indifference to school activities. Therefore, schools need to provide a safe and open space for expression so that each student can proudly display their cultural identity. This aligns with what the principal of Mukhtar Syafa'at Junior High School explained in an interview. Every student has an equal

opportunity to demonstrate their talents and interests in all areas, and there should be no limitations based on ethnic background or specific community groups that prevent them from doing so.

Furthermore, the teaching materials used by teachers should also reflect the diversity of students. Materials that incorporate diverse local cultures can strengthen each student's sense of identity. In this way, schools become not only places for academic learning but also spaces for the growth of values of togetherness and mutual respect. The teacher's concrete role is evident in learning that integrates multicultural materials, such as providing case studies and references from various cultures, conducting cross-cultural discussions, creating and establishing inclusive classroom rules that emphasise mutual respect, and facilitating cross-cultural discussions. In these discussions, teachers guide dialogues about differences in customs, traditions, and cultures, fostering empathy among students. Teachers also manage heterogeneous learning groups, blending students from diverse cultural backgrounds to help them interact and collaborate effectively.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of interethnic relations in schools are influenced by factors such as culture, language, institutional policies, teachers' roles, and the social environment, which shape patterns of student interaction. Inequality in understanding multicultural values often creates communication barriers and social distance, mainly when cultural differences are not managed inclusively. Therefore, schools play a strategic role in building social integration through educational policies and practices that are not merely symbolic but implemented in school activities. Implementing teacher training, developing a diversity-based curriculum, and cross-ethnic collaborative activities are concrete steps in creating a harmonious learning environment. Overall, multicultural schools play an essential role as spaces for the formation of a pluralistic national character and as a foundation for strengthening social cohesion amidst a heterogeneous society.

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