



Sustaining Culture among the Young Indonesian Generation

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ABSTRACT:

Teaching in a multicultural country such as Indonesia presents unique challenges. This paper examines how teachers envision diversity and how they build an inclusive learning environment in a multicultural classroom community. To address these questions, qualitative study was employed. Data collected included semi-structured interviews, journals, observations, class documentation, and relevant documents. In addition, the data gathered were analyzed thematically. This research requires the participation of two teachers who dedicated their time to teaching students in early childhood education. The study underscores various activities in teaching diversity to young generations that can inspire other teachers who want to foster a classroom environment where an individual's uniqueness is valued and nurtured. Also, several aspects of diversity are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Indonesia is a remarkably diverse country, both culturally and geographically. Several key aspects of diversity included ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, religious diversity, geographical diversity, cultural practices, and historical influences. The government recorded the number of islands in Indonesia as of 2021 as many as 17,000 islands, and there are 1,340 tribes, more than 300 ethnic groups that speak 840 languages (Buaq & Lorensius, 2022). The language used depends on the dialect of the region and the style differs based on geographical location (Aji et al., 2022). This rich tapestry of diversity makes Indonesia a vibrant and dynamic country with a wealth of cultural experiences to explore.

In terms of religious diversity, Indonesia has many beliefs that are embraced by the community. These beliefs include Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and others (local community beliefs). Data gathered from the Biro Hubungan Masyarakat Data dan Informasi (2022) showed that the population embraces Islam is 87.40%. As many as 20,647,769 people or by 7.47% claim themselves to believe in Christianity. In addition, more than 3% (8,501,292 people) of Indonesians embraced Catholicism and nearly 2% embraced Hinduism or as many as 4,692,548 people. Moreover, 2,016,564 people believed in Buddhism while less than 0.5% (74,899 people) were Confucianism. Many residents embraced other religions by 0.04% or as many as 117,412 people.

The population of Indonesia consists of many ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs that are pluralistic (Abdulkarim et al., 2020). These pluralisms are a key factor in creating social harmony. Nevertheless, if the government neglects the plurality of its population, there are various forms of disharmony and social conflict that may divide the nation. A study conducted by Abdulkarim et al. (2020) showed how differences could potentially be an obstacle for Indonesians which raises concerns about conflicts that can interfere with national integration. Furthermore, they argue that along with the development of technology and globalization, hate speech caused by dissent can also trigger intolerance.

In education, teaching young children presents a unique set of challenges due to their developmental stages, individual needs, and the dynamic nature of early childhood education (del Villar et al., 2019). Teaching multicultural concepts to young children comes with its own set of challenges and opportunities. These include short attention spans, limited language skills, building relationships, understanding diversity, and addressing stereotypes. The challenge for teachers lies in creating a safe space where students can be honest about their backgrounds and experiences without feeling marginalized if their experiences differ from others (Dellarosa, 2024). When teachers encourage students to be open about their individual experiences and biases, they also run risks because of the high sensitivity of the problem discussed. Addressing differences is challenging, but inevitable (Purnamasari, 2017).

Problems tend to occur as young generations learn how to socialize. For instance, they form alliances with each other based on ethnic, academic, or socioeconomic similarities, and there is even a mistake in teachers who are more supportive of students who are similar to them (McElroy-Johnson, 1993 in Purnamasari, 2017). Furthermore, the digital era has transformed education in numerous ways, pushing teachers to master online teaching (Dellarosa, 2022). The public is required to be sensitive to the globalization of the digital era which provides many changes, such as changing educational methods and practices. These changes have made education more flexible, accessible, and interactive. However, they also present other forms of challenges, such as ensuring digital equity and maintaining privacy and security in an online setting. In addition, teachers also must face other challenges, such as language, social and economic inequality, and cultural tensions (Sasmita, 2023). Also, young people may experience the loss of national identity and ancestral values (Salsabila et al., 2022, 108). The educational challenges require teachers to understand the concept of multiculturalism and play an active role in overcoming stereotypes and prejudices within themselves and among their students. Building a curriculum that reflects cultural diversity and worldviews and creating an inclusive classroom environment requires strong dedication and collaboration (Dellarosa, 2022). Thus, it is important for teachers to understand their students' backgrounds and needs.

We employed Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) as our theoretical framework to understand teachers' views and practices in multicultural settings. CSP emphasizes teachers' efforts in challenging inequities and providing a space to affirm students' cultural backgrounds (Paris & Alim, 2017), while also offering opportunities to understand about differences (Gay, 2010). Early childhood education should bring the spirit of multiculturalism in order to empower the young generation as agents of change who embrace differences. Teachers, specifically, have multifaceted and crucial roles for creating an inclusive and effective learning environment. They are expected to have cultural awareness and sensitivity toward differences where students' cultures are welcomed and sustained (Paris & Alim, 2017). In addition, fostering a respectful environment is a key element highlighted by the CSP. The notion of sustaining culture is essential "... to the (r)evolution of human civilization—to prosperity and justice, purpose and improvement" (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. 233). Thus, we envisioned CSP to provide advanced teaching narratives that

could inspire other early childhood programs in creating a welcoming space for sustaining young students' cultures.

The current research aims to address how teachers envision diversity in a multicultural classroom and how they build an inclusive learning environment in a multicultural community. We argue that valuing everyone's cultural background serves as a foundation for embracing diversity that equips young students to live in a multicultural society.

2. Method

The current study employed qualitative case study design (Thomas, 2015). This methodology was chosen to find out a specific rather than generalized case on how teachers create an inclusive learning environment. For this reason, this qualitative research requires the participation of two teachers who had experience in teaching young students at the age of 18 months to eight years old. The data obtained were in the form of in-person semi structured interviews, observations, journals, classroom documentations, and relevant documents. We interviewed two teachers at the scheduled time that lasted for about an hour. To gain validity of data, we had followed up discussions with the teachers to clarify their responses (Patton, 1999). We followed ethical guidelines from the institution where this research was conducted. This included obtaining institutional permission to conduct research, maintaining confidentiality, and having teachers' consent.

For data analysis, this study uses grounded theory where there were three stages of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, the data analysis process provided word labels or open coding for each piece of data. For data obtained from interviews, for example, it was transcribed first before it was labeled with words. The second step was axial coding. At this stage, the researcher selected a code or word that referred to a theme. At this stage, the researcher stayed close to the data to ensure that the words obtained through coding were in accordance with the data collected during the study. The last stage was selective coding. This stage was in word selection to find a theme contributing to the findings. These findings answered the research question and included new findings that added to the analysis and content of this study.

Research Site

The current research took place in an early childhood education located in East Java, organized under one of public universities in Indonesia. The facility opened daily from Monday to Friday, 7.30 am - 4.30 pm. The program emphasized children's development in their psychology, physiology, cognitive, and spiritual growth under the experience of teachers and caregivers. According to teachers' explanations, the typical staff-to-child ratio was one staff member to two toddlers (13-24 months). The reason was at this age, toddlers were more mobile and curious. However, they still needed significant supervision, assistance, and guidance. To describe the ratio of teachers to students in a classroom, a teacher explained that one staff member to seven preschoolers (3-4 years). Ms. Rona explained that preschoolers were more independent and could engage in group activities with support from teachers. Also, one staff member to ten pre-kindergarten/kindergarten (5-6 years). For children at this stage, they were generally more self-sufficient and could participate in structured group activities. This study required an inclusion of this site because the playschool represented a unique program for young children, specifically on how the inclusive program was created to value differences.

Research Participants

There were two teachers, Ms Rona and Ms Alen (pseudonym), who participated in this study. Ms Rona pursued her education at the same institution where the daycare was located. She worked as a program coordinator since the start of the program. To enhance her expertise in education, Ms Rona pursued a master program, focusing on early childhood education. In addition, Ms Alen had an art background that contributed to the enhancement of the program. Even though teaching young children was not her dream job, she explained that her knowledge in art was still relevant to be implemented in teaching the younger generation. She added that her art skills were applied in designing a fun and engaging art activity that can be adapted for different age groups and skill levels. Teachers' involvement in this study was needed because the way they taught contributed to the development of an inclusive education globally.

3. Result And Discussion

The current study aims to answer the following questions: How do teachers envision diversity in a multicultural classroom and how do they build an inclusive learning environment in a multicultural classroom community. To answer these questions, we collected data in various forms. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, we mainly analyzed and presented data from interviews with teachers. As we analyzed teachers' narratives, several themes emerged. We chose three relevant themes that addressed our topic. Although teachers' responses during the interview were varied, we found similar issues among their answers. Furthermore, it is important to note that we provide data in the participants' mother language (i.e., Bahasa) as the way we respect their local value.

3.1. Everyone is Valued Here! Recognizing Differences in Young Generations

The interview with teachers revealed the meaning of differences by bringing up several instances of differences. Ms. Rona, the program coordinator, explained that understanding a concept of diversity can be from various perspectives, such as diversity based on cultures, types of skins, religions, and languages. She emphasized that even though there were differences, people had to tolerate it and have willingness to understand each other. Relating to her role as a teacher, Ms. Rona added that understanding differences was a key concept to teach young children about diversity.

"Beragam itu pasti ini ya banyak beragam itu berarti kan bermacam-macam jenis budaya, jenis kulit, jenis agama, jenis bahasa. Intinya meskipun kita tuh beragam ya kita harus saling toleransi, saling memahami dan saling mau belajar juga karena mungkin itu bukan budaya kita ya tapi enggak ada salahnya juga kita kalau mencari tahu tentang gimana sih budaya di sini jadi kayak itu buat bekal kita pemahaman kita, kalau misalnya kita dapat mengajarkan ke anak." "Diversity means a wide range of differences, various types of cultures, skin types, religions, and languages. The point is that even though we are diverse, we must tolerate each other, understand each other and want to learn from each other too because maybe it's not our culture, but nothing wrong for us to find out about the other culture, so it's like providing our understanding, if for example we can teach children" (Ms Rona).

Meanwhile, Ms. Alen provided an instance of positioning herself in a multicultural country, Indonesia, through traditional foods from a specific place.

"Contoh kecil, ... saya lho habis dari Jogja beli ini (makanan), aku (menjelaskan murid lain) juga pernah ke sini, terus kita sebagai bunda menyambungkan cerita itu biar nanti mereka "oh ternyata di sini ada (makanan) ini" lebih ke menyatukan mereka aja sih kalau beraneka ragam budaya." "An example, ... I know that I went to Jogja to buy this (food), I (explained other students) have also been here, so we as teachers I tried to connect the story so that they will learn" oh it turns out that there is this (food) here" more about explaining them if there are various cultures" (Ms Alen).

Teachers in the current study asserted that the curriculum employed in the program was a creative curriculum with a play-based approach. Students learned multicultural materials through various topics such as traditional food and traditional clothes. In one activity, students were invited to do a mismatched clothes activity in which they had several pictures of traditional clothes and tried to find clothes based on specific regions. Similarly, students were asked to find traditional food based on the original culture. In doing this activity, teachers added a short description of the food.

Ms Rona exemplified a specific food that has various names in different cities. For instance, vegetable nest fritters were a portion of mixed vegetables covered in a portion of dough that was deep fried. It was called *bakwan* by people who live in Jakarta. *"Misalnya kota A pasti makanannya berbeda, tapi biasanya kalau makanan itu namanya itu beda tapi hasilnya sama. contoh kayak ini bakwan ya bener ya, di Jakarta itu kan bakwan kalau di sini itu ote-ote"* (For instance, city A has various foods, even though the name is varied but the taste is same, like in Jakarta this food is called bakwan but here is called ote-ote). Meanwhile, people in another city named it *ote-ote*. Nevertheless, *ote-ote* has a different meaning for those who live in Nganjuk, a city in East Java. It could mean top naked man. Teachers emphasized that through this instance, students had a broader understanding of a concept. The various names of food from a specific region could help them in practicing tolerance. Furthermore, students at a young age, specifically, learn and accept different ideas that foster open-mindedness.

It is interesting to understand that teachers find it easier to teach diversity through religion than culture. Another instance presented during the interview was about practicing religion. Ms Alen said that one of her students asked her if people had different ways of practicing their religion. She explained that we lived in a multicultural country, Indonesia. She added that introducing the concept of diversity about religion was simpler than about culture. According to Ms Alen, introducing the concept of culture was too abstract for young children and it was a "big" topic for them. When students learnt about culture, she preferred to address topics around food from various cities. In line with the literature review, teachers in the present study demonstrated the relevant learning experiences to their students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Dellarosa (2024) argues that infusing religious values to the young generation serves as a solid foundation for their spiritual growth. Teachers in the current study discuss religion as a topic for discussion because Indonesians are expected to believe and practice a religion in their daily life.

Teachers' practice in valuing each student's culture is an example of how education should welcome and appreciate diversity. As Paris and Alim (2017) said, "Instead of being oppressive, homogenizing forces, CSP asks us to reimagine schools as sites where diverse, heterogeneous practices are not only valued but sustained (p. 4)". Teachers who are committed to sustaining their diverse students' culture should engage themselves in the spirit of diversity.

"As we think about the kinds of teaching and learning settings required to sustain communities as part of pluralistic societies, we join other critical scholars who recognize the need to shift the function of schooling from assimilation to cultural pluralism" (Alim., et al., 2020, p. 262).

Ms Rona and Ms Alen envision diversity as they welcome and sustain differences among their students.

3.2. Creating Welcoming Learning Environments

Teachers' efforts in creating a welcoming classroom environment were reflected in the daily learning practices. The interview with Ms. Rona demonstrated how they nurtured tolerance among students. She explained that the class started with morning exercise for about 20 minutes. Then, Ms. Alen added that once the students finished exercise, they went inside and started the activity with prayer. To make it more relevant, students were asked to pray based on the religion they believed in and only prayed in a simple word, such as saying thank you to God for the health they gained. Ms Rona explained that a student might voluntarily lead daily prayer in an Islamic way. When he said it out loud, other students who believed in the same religion would follow after him. Teacher added that the situation was flexible, depending on the academic year. For instance, if it was during the Summer time when school was on break and not many students came, the teacher guided the students to pray.

As it has been discussed in the literature section, practicing daily prayer is a relevant instance of learning for students who live in a religious country like Indonesia. Ms Rona asserted that even though Muslim prayer was delivered first, Muslim students had to tolerate other students when they prayed based on their belief. *"ini doanya untuk yang muslim dulu ya, tapi meskipun doanya muslim, yang Muslim juga harus saling menghargai"* (we start the prayer for Muslims, however even though this is Islamic prayer, Muslims should tolerate others). We clarified to teachers on how they set up the learning environment when students recite a prayer out loud because it could potentially distract other students who believed in a different religion. Moreover, students at an early age might picture concepts of other religions to acquire new skills. They draw the notion of what they have learned and mimic actions they have observed to remember information. This helps students reinforce their learning imitation and visual representation. Teachers in the present study emphasized that they should tolerate other students when they practiced their religion.

Connecting to the tenet of CSP, the goal of education should be a place to both value and sustain students' culture (Paris & Alim, 2017). Nevertheless, it can be a challenge for Indonesian teachers to sustain all of students' cultural and religious background, especially when the discussion is about religion. Study has demonstrated that Islam is a predominant religion in Indonesia that impacts its power in the daily life of Indonesians, including education (Dellarosa, 2021). This influences how hegemonic knowledge controls people's view and decisions they made (Van Dijk, 1993). "Control over certain discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society" (Gee, 1989, p. 19). Relating to Indonesia as a religious country, a certain religion that dominates society would automatically have social power (Van Dijk, 1993). When teachers want to infuse certain religious values, they are expected to provide a relevant learning environment to students who believe in other religions, as Indonesia acknowledges six religions and other beliefs (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2015, data reflective of 1991 to 2017). In other words, teachers are required to provide equal and relevant support for students regardless of their backgrounds because representation is acknowledging someone's presence (Bartz, & Bartz, 2018; Dellarosa, 2021). Teachers are supposed to build a welcoming learning environment that addresses and affirms students' backgrounds (Dellarosa, 2022). As Sensoy (2014) argues, school should be a place to both reinforce social justice and nurture future generations for social transformation. Students who learn in diverse cultures are trained to have open-mindedness, be responsive to differences, and analyze issues from multiple perspectives (Chu, 2018). These skills equip students to live in a multicultural society.

3.3. Critical Lessons through Conflicts Arise

The interview with teachers showed that young students experienced conflict in their daily interaction with peers. Ms Alen said that conflict arises among young students because of several factors, including age differences. In one instance, she explained that a student tried to grab a toy from someone who did not want to play with it. *"Ini Liam kan tipenya mau ngomong, dia itu mau bicara, mempertabankan hak dia. nah Liam itu kayak mau nangis. mungkin sedih ya sedih kayak "kok aku bertengkar sama ini"* (Liam is a typical student who speaks up, he is willing to share, defend his right. Liam almost cries and feels sad, why do I fight with my friend" (Ms Rona). In responding to conflict, older students tended to be calm than younger students. Depending on the character of a child, a student was more sensitive than the others. Also, students who have the ability to express their feelings and emotions tend to obtain the right help from teachers. In other words, experienced teachers, like in the present study, could offer the best assistant based on an individual's needs. As such, the teacher said that it could be a lesson learned from their teaching.

“Jadinya meskipun Liam itu usianya lebih besar, tapi dia bertengkar sama temen tub langsung sedih. Jadi itu juga sebenarnya juga perbedaan juga (Even though Liam is older, he feels sad when he fights with his friend. This is the real difference between) (Ms Alen)”. In line with the literature review, conflict could offer an opportunity to understand differences (Gay, 2010). Teachers can guide their students to be respectful to others.

To continuously better equip themselves, teachers actively engage in professional development once a month. In this program, they shared daily teaching that included challenges and conflicts that arise among young students. Then, they obtained constructive feedback from their mentors or the program coordinator. Both teachers confirmed that such professional development was needed to enhance their teaching skills, stay updated on the recent issues, and improve students outcomes. The interview with Ms Rona showed that each student was different and it required different approaches to understand students. “Jadi kita di sini lebih bisa memahami anak satu per satu karena setiap anak itu pasti berbeda-beda...” (through this professional development, we have a better understanding of our students because each of them is unique). Building such pedagogy helps teachers to be well equipped in preparing students who accept and empathize with others who have both different religious beliefs and traditions (Bennett et al., 2022). They are anticipated to create relevant instructional resources not only in school textbooks but also other curricular materials (Chu, 2015). Moreover, teachers can manage conflicts among young students constructively to have positive impacts on their development.

4. Conclusion

The current study aims to address how teachers envision diversity in a multicultural classroom and how they build an inclusive learning environment in a multicultural classroom community. Teachers describe how diversity should be appreciated and nurtured among young generations by valuing everyone’s cultural background. Moreover, the findings demonstrate teachers’ efforts in creating a welcoming learning environment for diverse students through their daily teaching.

Several limitations are presented. Initially, the study focuses on analyzing the teaching experiences of two teachers. This is relevant to type of research since the aim of this study is to look at a specific rather than generalized case. In other words, the findings from this study may not be relevant to be extended to other contexts. In addition, the program has been under development for two years, providing a solid foundation for further exploration. Nevertheless, the initial programs have also revealed several areas where additional research could yield valuable insights. Future studies could focus on expanding the scope of the program, evaluating its long-term impacts, or exploring its applicability in different contexts and populations. These areas of research will help to refine the program, enhance its effectiveness, and broaden its potential benefits.

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