


## Dynamics of Forming Multicultural Awareness of Students at SMKN 5 Gorontalo

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### A B S T R A C T

Multicultural education has a strategic role in forming inclusive attitudes and harmonious social relations in a pluralistic school environment. However, the study of multicultural education has tended to emphasize curricular and cognitive approaches, thus ignoring the role of school social and cultural practices in shaping students' multicultural awareness. This study aims to analyze how school culture shapes students' multicultural awareness and identify challenges in the process of its formation at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo. The research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study show that students' multicultural awareness is more predominantly formed through daily social practices based on local wisdom, such as collective work, deliberation, and cross-cultural interaction. However, this awareness is still implicit and faces challenges in the form of a lack of reflection on values, exclusive social relations, and a reduction in multicultural meanings in symbolic practices. This study concludes that strengthening school culture needs to be directed at the development of reflective mechanisms so that students' multicultural awareness develops critically and sustainably.

**Keywords:** *Multicultural Education, School Culture, Multicultural Awareness, Social Practice*

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## INTRODUCTION

Multicultural education was not born as a final and established concept, but rather as an idea that is constantly debated and reinterpreted without universal consensus. In academic debate, multicultural education is interpreted not only as an ethics of recognition of cultural differences, but also as a critical project that questions the relationship of power and social inequality in educational institutions (Rentzi, 2024). This diversity of definitions shows that multicultural education is not a static concept, but rather an ever-evolving theoretical field.

Therefore, efforts to understand multicultural education cannot be separated from the social reality in which the education takes place. Because multicultural education operates as a paradigm that serves to educate the public to understand and appreciate differences, as well as to equip critical and dialogical capacities in resolving social and cultural issues that have the potential to trigger conflicts (R. Nasution & Albina, 2024).

In a pluralistic society, multicultural education is closely related to the process of forming democratic citizens. Indonesia as one of the most plural countries in the world characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity puts schools in a strategic position as a space for social learning (Jayadi et al., 2022 ; Setinawati et al., 2025). Schools not only carry out the function of transmitting academic knowledge, but also play a role as an arena for the socialization of values, the formation of a common identity in differences (Yasin et al., 2024).

A number of studies have shown that effective multicultural educational practices contribute to increasing cross-cultural awareness, mutual respect, reducing social prejudice, and strengthening social bonds in the educational environment (Shinta & Albina, 2024; Siregar et al., 2024; Firtikasari & Andiana, 2023). Theoretically, multicultural education is often

associated with social learning theories that view values and attitudes as the result of repetitive social interactions and experiences. Multicultural awareness is not formed through cognitive teaching alone, but rather through student involvement in social practice (Nurdin & Aini, 2025)

Therefore, multicultural education that focuses only on cognitive aspects risks producing normative understanding without meaningful transformation of attitudes. Various empirical studies confirm that the integration of multicultural values of social practice contributes to increased student learning engagement, and a sense of belonging (*school belonging*) (Ardiansyah, 2025; Sari & Relawaty, 2025). Multicultural experiences experienced directly are also positively correlated with happiness, life satisfaction, and positive effects on students, while reducing victimization and social conflict in schools. In schools with a multi-ethnic student composition, rich intercultural opportunities have been shown to encourage higher intercultural competence and inclusive attitudes than relatively homogeneous schools (David-Izvernar et al., 2025; Addarunnafis et al., 2025). In Indonesia, the integration of multicultural values in religious education and in local wisdom activities is reported to be able to strengthen tolerance between students and build a culture of mutual cooperation (Dotutinggi et al., 2024).

However, the dominance of curricular approaches and formal policies in the study of multicultural education leaves conceptual limitations. Many studies view multicultural awareness as an individual attribute that can be measured through an attitude scale such as *multicultural awareness* or *intercultural competence*. This approach tends to ignore the relational and cultural dimensions of school life, whereas multicultural values are actually produced and reproduced through everyday social practices. As a result, multicultural education has been reduced in meaning, from a dynamic social process to a mere individual psychological indicator that is detached from the context of real educational practice.

The integration of multicultural values in the curriculum, teacher training, and the development of an inclusive school culture are important steps in multicultural education. However, its implementation still faces various obstacles, such as limited teacher understanding, lack of appropriate teaching materials, and social resistance that affects the acceptance of diversity values in the school environment (Taba et al., 2025). These findings confirm that multicultural education is not enough to judge from the existence of official policies or documents, but from its impact on the social interactions experienced by students. This kind of implementive problem is becoming increasingly relevant to be studied in educational units with heterogeneous social characteristics and institutional orientations that are different from public schools.

On this basis, the gap in studies is becoming more and more evident in the context of vocational high schools (SMK). Most multicultural education research has so far focused more on higher education or public high schools, while vocational schools have received relatively little attention.

In fact, vocational schools have distinctive characteristics in the form of vocational orientation, diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds, and school culture that tends to be pragmatic and oriented towards the world of work. These characteristics have the potential to shape different multicultural consciousness dynamics, so findings from other educational contexts cannot be generalized directly.

In addition, cross-context research shows that students' cross-cultural competence is determined not only by the multicultural educational model implemented by schools, but also by the intensity and quality of social diversity experienced in daily life. This emphasizes the importance of local contexts in shaping the multicultural learning process.

SMKN 5 Gorontalo as a vocational high school in a multicultural area is a relevant empirical arena. The diversity of students' backgrounds makes this school a social space where multicultural values are not only taught, but practiced, negotiated, and tested in daily interactions. Therefore, this study is directed to analyze how school culture plays a role in shaping students' multicultural awareness, by placing daily social practices as the main focus of the study. Based on this description, this study is focused on two main problems, namely:

(1) how school culture shapes the multicultural awareness of students at SMKN 5 Gorontalo; and (2) Challenges in the process of forming multicultural awareness.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The descriptive approach aims to systematically and accurately describe the social phenomena being studied, in particular the dynamics of the formation of students' multicultural awareness through school culture. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand social reality in depth based on experiences, views, and social practices that take place in the school environment (Sugiyono, 2011)

The descriptive qualitative research procedure is carried out systematically through several stages that are mutually continuous, including the formulation of research problems, literature review, research design, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation and presentation of research results. The procedure serves as a guideline for the research process to run in a directional manner, maintain consistency in data collection and processing, and ensure the validity and reliability of research findings (Arikunto, 2013).

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from informants who were directly involved in the social and cultural life of the school, including school principals, teachers, education staff, students, and other parties relevant to the formation of school culture at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo. Primary data is used to obtain direct information about social practices, interaction patterns, and students' meanings of diversity in the school environment. Meanwhile, secondary data is sourced from school documents, education policies, activity reports, and scientific works relevant to multicultural education and school culture. Secondary data serves to complement, reinforce, and verify primary data.

Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation is used to observe firsthand the social practices and cross-cultural interactions that take place in school life. The interviews were conducted to explore the views, experiences, and interpretations of informants related to the formation and challenges of multicultural awareness. Documentation is used to search for written and visual data that support an understanding of the school's cultural context.

Data analysis is carried out using an interactive analysis model, which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification. (Miles & Huberman, 1992). Data reduction is carried out by selecting and focusing data according to the research objectives. The presentation of data is carried out in the form of a descriptive narrative to facilitate the understanding of patterns and relationships between findings, while conclusions are drawn in stages by continuing to verify the data obtained until it produces findings that are valid and scientifically accountable.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Form of School Culture in Fostering Students' Multicultural Awareness**

The results of the research at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo show that students' multicultural awareness is more predominantly formed through daily social practices inherent in school culture, rather than through formally designed multicultural education. Cross-cultural interaction is built naturally along with the diversity of students' backgrounds coming from different ethnicities, religions, and cultures. This diversity is experienced directly in school routines and becomes part of students' daily social lives.

The findings of the study show that the multicultural value that emerges is a collective work practice that reflects the value of huyula as the local wisdom of the Gorontalo people. The value of huyula is manifested in community service activities, cross-class group assignments, extracurricular activities, and student involvement in various school agendas. In this practice, students participate functionally without differentiating cultural and religious

identities. These local values function as a social mechanism that bridges differences and strengthens togetherness in the school environment.

In addition to values, school culture also shapes students' multicultural perceptions through the habituation of heterogeneous group work and a culture of deliberation in class decision-making and student activities. This practice creates a space for cross-identity dialogue that trains students to respect differences of views and build mutual agreement. At the level of attitude tendencies, student involvement in school collective activities that are cross-interest forms a relatively open tendency towards diversity. Although these practices are not explicitly labeled as multicultural education, repeated social experiences form the habit of coexistence in difference.

The multicultural awareness of students at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo is more formed at the level of daily social practice, but it has not been fully articulated as a reflective conceptual awareness. This condition shows that there is a gap between the multicultural experience experienced by students and the ability to interpret it critically as a multicultural value. School culture has served as the foundation for implicitly multicultural consciousness, but it still needs reflective reinforcement for that consciousness to develop more deeply and sustainably.

These findings can be understood within the framework of sociocultural studies that see multicultural awareness as a social process that continues to be shaped through daily interactions. In theoretical debates, multicultural consciousness is not understood as a final and normative condition, but rather as the result of social dynamics that take place in a sustainable manner. Multicultural consciousness is understood as the result of the interaction of values, perceptions, and attitude tendencies that shape the orientation of individuals or groups in responding to cultural, religious, and social background differences (Lukum et al., 2025).

Multicultural values serve as a moral basis and social guideline for building inclusive relationships, perceptions shape the way individuals interpret differences, while attitudes reflect the accumulation of social experiences that determine the quality of cross-cultural interactions as well as social cohesion within the educational community (Purwanto, 2025).

In the context of education, multicultural awareness is understood as part of the process of cultural socialization that takes place in the school environment. Schools function not only as formal knowledge transmission institutions, but also as social spaces that shape the way students interpret the reality of diversity. School culture serves as a system of values, norms, and social practices that influence the formation of students' multicultural consciousness through the experience of living together in differences (Saleha et al., 2026). In this perspective, the formation of multicultural awareness does not have to be done through formal curricular programs, but can grow implicitly through collective habits, interaction patterns, and social mechanisms that govern the lives of school residents.

Conceptually, multicultural consciousness can be analyzed through three main dimensions. First, multicultural values as a basic principle that serves as a moral guideline in responding to cultural differences, including respect for diversity, equality, and togetherness (Diaz et al., 2025). Second, multicultural perception, which is the way individuals or groups understand and interpret diversity in their social environment, which is formed from the experience of interaction and institutional policies (Ruwiyanto et al., 2025). Third, multicultural tendencies, namely individual attitudes and actions patterns in responding to differences, which are the result of internalized accumulation of values and perceptions through repetitive social practices (Sutalhis & Novaria, 2023). These three dimensions influence each other and shape the social orientation of individuals in multicultural life.

### **The Challenge of Forming Students' Multicultural Awareness through School Culture**

The findings of the research at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo show that the main challenge in forming students' multicultural awareness does not lie in the absence of diversity practices, but in the way in which diversity is interpreted by students. Ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity has been present as part of daily school life, but it tends to be understood as a normal social routine and is not always consciously associated with the formation of multicultural

consciousness. This condition causes the practice of cohabitation in differences to run functionally, but not yet fully develop into a reflective understanding of values.

In addition, the findings of the study found that the pattern of students' social relations still showed a tendency towards exclusivity. Despite being in a heterogeneous school environment, some students interact more intensely with groups that have similar backgrounds. This situation gives birth to the illusion of multicultural consciousness, in which existence in a diverse environment is considered to have sufficiently represented a multicultural attitude, even though deep cross-identity interactions have not yet been fully developed. These challenges limit the depth of social relations and hinder the process of understanding each other more substantively.

The next challenge is seen in the tendency to reduce the meaning of multicultural consciousness into symbolic and ceremonial practices. Multicultural awareness is often associated with student involvement in national holiday celebrations, cultural activities, or school togetherness agendas. These practices are indeed a space for cross-identity encounters, but they risk being understood solely as formal indicators of togetherness without deepening values. As a result, multicultural awareness appears more as a situational attitude, rather than as a value orientation internalized in students' daily lives.

These findings show that the challenge of forming multicultural awareness of students at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo is structural-cultural, namely the distance between the multicultural social practices that have been running and the associated process of reflection of values. Diversity has been experienced, but it has not been fully interpreted critically as part of the formation of students' identities and social orientations.

These findings can then be understood in the framework of sociocultural studies that view multicultural awareness not as a final and normative condition, but as a social process that continues to be shaped through daily interactions. In theoretical debates, the challenge of multicultural consciousness arises when the interaction of values, perceptions, and attitude tendencies is not developed in a balanced manner. Multicultural values that are not consciously reflected have the potential to be reduced to social habits, perceptions of differences can develop superficially or stereotypically, and attitudes that are formed from social experiences without reflection of values tend to result in tolerance that is practical but not critical (Firmansyah et al., 2025).

In the context of education, schools function as a space for cultural socialization that not only transmits formal knowledge, but also shapes the way students interpret social reality. School culture rich in multicultural social practices does not necessarily automatically reflect the internalization of reflective multicultural values. Without mechanisms that link social practices to the meaning of values, the shared experience of living in differences risks stopping at the level of daily routines (S. I. Nasution & Fauzan, 2025). This explains why the challenge of multicultural awareness formation persists despite intense cross-cultural interactions in the school environment.

Conceptually, the challenge of forming students' multicultural consciousness can be analyzed through three main dimensions. First, the challenge to the value dimension, when diversity is seen as a common condition so that it is no longer articulated as the value of equality and appreciation for differences. Second, the challenge to the perception dimension, namely the tendency to understand diversity on the surface without critical reflection on the pattern of exclusive social relations. Third, the challenge is in the dimension of attitude tendencies, namely the formation of tolerant attitudes that are symbolic and situational, but have not been fully realized in the depth of social interaction. These three dimensions are interrelated and form obstacles in the development of a more critical and sustainable multicultural consciousness.

A review of the overall findings shows the challenge of forming students' multicultural awareness through school culture at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo shows that there is a gap between established multicultural social practices and the reflective internalization of multicultural values. School culture has succeeded in creating a space of living that is relatively harmonious in diversity, but still faces limitations in encouraging students to understand,

reflect, and critically appreciate the meaning of multiculturalism. Therefore, the strengthening of school culture in the future needs to be directed not only at the sustainability of multicultural social practices, but also at the development of reflective mechanisms that allow students' multicultural awareness to grow more deeply and sustainably

## CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics of the formation of multicultural awareness of students at SMK Negeri 5 Gorontalo show that school culture plays a significant role as a space for socializing values through daily social practices. Students' multicultural awareness is more implicitly formed through intercultural interactions that are integrated in collective work based on local *wisdom huyula*, habituation of heterogeneous group work, a culture of deliberation, and involvement in school collective activities. These practices allow students to experience diversity firsthand and form a value orientation, perception, and tendency to be relatively open to differences. However, the formation of multicultural awareness still faces structural-cultural challenges, especially in the limitation of reflection on the value reflection of the multicultural experiences experienced by students. Diversity tends to be interpreted as a functional social routine, students' social relations still show a tendency to exclusivity, and multicultural awareness is often reduced to symbolic or ceremonial practices. This condition indicates a gap between the intensity of multicultural social practices and the reflective and critical internalization of multicultural values. Therefore, strengthening school culture going forward needs to be directed not only at the sustainability of multicultural social practices, but also at the development of reflective mechanisms that allow the experience of living together in diversity to transform into a deeper, critical, and sustainable multicultural awareness.

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