

# Challenges for Religious-Based Schools in Implementing Multicultural Education

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**Abstract.** This study aims to identify and analyze the challenges faced by the North Sumatra Islamic Center Foundation in implementing multicultural education in its school environment. As an Islamic-based educational institution, the Foundation holds a strategic role in fostering awareness of the importance of tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity within a multicultural society. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The results of the study indicate that the main challenges include resistance from some members of the school community, limited teacher understanding of multicultural education concepts, lack of specialized training, and perceptions of religious exclusivity that hinder the acceptance of cultural and belief diversity. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening teacher capacity, developing curricula responsive to multicultural contexts, and promoting more progressive policy support to realize inclusive education and foster harmony in faith-based schools.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, implementation challenges, faith-based school, North Sumatra Islamic Center Foundation, diversity

## 1 Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, encompassing hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, traditions, and religions. This remarkable diversity, while a national asset, also poses significant challenges to the education sector. Multicultural education has therefore emerged as an essential response to the need for fostering tolerance, nurturing respect for differences, and strengthening unity in a heterogeneous society [1]. Religious-based schools, such as the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra, hold a particularly strategic role in this endeavor. Their responsibility extends beyond transmitting academic knowledge; they are also tasked with cultivating moral, ethical, and spiritual values that align with the principles of inclusivity and diversity.

Teachers stand at the forefront of this mission, serving as educators, mentors, and role models who embody and transmit multicultural values [2]. However, the integration of multicultural education into religious-based schools continues to face considerable challenges. Many teachers

still lack a comprehensive understanding of multicultural concepts, classroom practices often remain traditional, and the social environment surrounding some schools does not always encourage pluralistic values [3]. These issues highlight the urgent need to explore the specific challenges encountered by religious-based institutions as they attempt to embed multicultural education in their teaching and organizational practices.

Scholarly interest in multicultural education has grown steadily, with researchers acknowledging its importance across social, cultural, political, and religious domains. Khairuddin observes that awareness of multiculturalism continues to increase, especially among students from diverse backgrounds [1]. Yet, studies conducted by Sulalah [4], Indrapangastuti [5], and Asmuri [6] reveal persistent problems, including the absence of comprehensive models, imbalances in curricular frameworks, and ineffective implementation strategies. Sangadji [7] emphasizes that education in plural societies like Indonesia must be designed to promote tolerance and mutual respect. This view resonates with Hanum and Rahmadonna [8] and Arifin [9], who argue that multicultural education equips children to better understand and appreciate the diversity that surrounds them.

Banks [10] further suggests that multicultural education in schools must be supported not only by fair treatment of students from different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds but also by inclusive curricula, equitable evaluation systems, and culturally competent teachers. Abdullah et al. [11] stress that the Indonesian Ministry of Education has a pivotal role in mainstreaming multicultural values at all levels of education. Nevertheless, as noted by Sangadji [7] and Jalwis & Habibi [12], integration remains uneven, with multicultural education either insufficiently embedded or treated as an additional rather than a core component.

Similar shortcomings are observed in international contexts. Asmuri [6] underscores the need for stronger curriculum socialization in primary schools in Indonesia, while Aydin [13] highlights that Turkey, despite its long multicultural history, has not fully succeeded in reflecting diversity in its educational practices. In contrast, the United States has developed more systematic approaches, emphasizing inclusive curricula, democratic pedagogies, and active engagement of both parents and students [14]. These comparisons reveal that the absence of a coherent vision and systemic design is a common challenge that limits the full realization of multicultural education [12].

Beyond academic outcomes, multicultural education is essential for building students' socio-emotional skills such as empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural collaboration. Alghamdi [15] notes that equitable opportunities provided by multicultural education help reduce achievement gaps and advance social justice. Teachers thus play a pivotal role in cultivating inclusive classrooms, designing culturally responsive curricula, and modeling tolerance and respect. Suryaman and Juharyanto [16] further argue that schools embracing pluralism must actively celebrate diversity, foster cross-cultural engagement, and promote democratic values in daily school life.

To achieve these objectives, teachers in religious-based schools require continuous professional development in areas such as cross-cultural pedagogy, anti-bias education, and the integration of multicultural content across disciplines. Medan, a city marked by its ethnic and religious diversity, exemplifies both the opportunities and tensions of multiculturalism in Indonesia. While diversity has the potential to strengthen social cohesion, it may also lead to conflict when poorly managed. Aydin [13] stresses that multicultural education must be grounded in the lived

realities of diverse communities, while Suryaman and Juhar [16] highlight its transformative role in empowering students to challenge prejudice and stereotypes.

In this light, the present study focuses on the challenges faced by religious-based schools, particularly the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra, in implementing multicultural education. It seeks to examine the difficulties encountered by teachers, the strategies adopted to overcome these barriers, and the broader implications for educational policy and practice. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for developing more inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive approaches to education in faith-based institutions.

## **2 Method Study**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the challenges faced by religious-based schools in implementing multicultural education, with a specific focus on the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra at the Aliyah level. The case study approach was chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of complex social dynamics, particularly those shaped by classroom interactions, institutional culture, and teacher practices [17]. Teachers were selected as the main informants since they play a central role in transmitting knowledge, modeling inclusive behavior, and shaping students' attitudes toward diversity [18]

Data were collected using three techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture teachers' perspectives on multicultural learning, teaching strategies, and the obstacles they encounter. Second, classroom observations were carried out to directly examine how these strategies were applied in practice, including lesson delivery, classroom interaction, and group activities. Third, document analysis was employed to review curricula, lesson plans, and school policies that reflect institutional support for multicultural education.

The collected data were analyzed through the steps of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as outlined by Miles and Huberman [19]. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents strengthened the validity of findings, while member checking with participants ensured accurate interpretation. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive picture of how teachers manage the dual responsibility of maintaining religious identity while promoting values of tolerance and inclusivity.

## **3 Results And Discussion**

### **Results**

The findings reveal that the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra operates within a unique position as a religious-based school that strives to integrate multicultural values while maintaining a strong Islamic identity. Teachers and administrators perceive the institution not only as an educational provider but also as a moral and cultural mandate from the wider community. This dual responsibility preserving religious commitment while preparing students for coexistence in a plural society frames both the strengths and the challenges of implementation.

The results show that the school community is highly diverse, with students coming from 17 different ethnic groups across North Sumatra. This heterogeneity provides rich opportunities for cross-cultural learning, but also creates tensions. Teachers consistently emphasize tolerance in classrooms and dormitories, yet resistance from some students who prefer to socialize within their own ethnic or religious circles remains evident. Cultural programs such as food fairs, dialogue circles, and language clubs have been effective in encouraging interaction, though their impact depends on consistent teacher involvement and monitoring.

At the instructional level, teachers attempt to link Qur'anic teachings with everyday practices of cooperation and respect. However, the study found that not all teachers fully understand multicultural pedagogy. Many continue to rely on traditional lecture-based methods, which limit opportunities for dialogue and critical engagement. The lack of systematic training in inclusive teaching, conflict resolution, and classroom management in diverse settings emerges as a significant challenge. Teachers acknowledge the need for professional development, particularly in designing curricula that balance religious instruction with openness to cultural plurality.

Institutional support plays a key role but also reflects limitations. While the foundation provides facilities such as dormitories, laboratories, and co-curricular spaces, the evaluation system still relies heavily on traditional assessments, with little attention to measuring growth in empathy, collaboration, and civic responsibility. Leadership actively promotes multicultural activities, yet external policy support remains limited, leaving much of the responsibility on the school itself. This creates a gap between aspirations and resources, where teachers are often left to innovate on their own.

Despite these challenges, positive changes are observable. Peer tutoring, group projects, and structured discussions have helped reduce prejudice and foster cooperation among students. Teachers report that exposure to diverse peers gradually reduces stereotypes and encourages openness, though the process is slow and uneven. Staff solidarity, seen in mutual-aid associations and collaborative governance, reinforces the institutional ethos of inclusivity. Parents' involvement through workshops and open houses also supports the alignment of multicultural values between home and school.

Overall, the results highlight that the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra demonstrates the potential of religious-based schools to embrace multicultural education. However, it also underlines persistent challenges: limited teacher capacity in multicultural pedagogy, reliance on conventional evaluation systems, and insufficient external policy support. These findings suggest that sustained training, curriculum innovation, and stronger institutional backing are necessary to ensure that multicultural education is not only an aspiration but a lived reality within religious-based schools.

## **Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that teachers at the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra carry a crucial responsibility in operationalizing multicultural values within classroom practices. Their role extends beyond delivering religious knowledge to include shaping students' attitudes and fostering inclusive learning environments. As Banks [20] emphasizes, teachers are the central agents in multicultural education, responsible for connecting curricular goals with classroom realities. In this study, teachers acted as facilitators and mediators, ensuring that

cultural and religious differences became opportunities for dialogue rather than conflict [8] However, challenges remain evident. Limited pedagogical readiness, insufficient resources, and stereotypes brought from students' family environments continue to hinder the full realization of inclusive learning [4], [21].

Institutional support has proven to be an enabling factor but also exposes certain limitations. Leadership within the Foundation actively encourages the incorporation of multicultural themes into lesson plans and co-curricular activities, aligning with Abdullah et al.'s [11] argument that strong institutional direction is essential for sustaining multicultural practices. Cultural events such as festivals, language clubs, and community service programs provide practical spaces for students to learn about diversity, yet their effectiveness depends on continuous resources and teacher involvement [3] Moreover, religious-based schools must navigate the delicate balance between affirming Islamic identity and promoting openness to pluralism. Aydin [13] argues that faith-based schools often struggle with this dual responsibility, but teachers in this study addressed it by framing Islamic values as universal ethics such as compassion, justice, and respect [22] This framing allows religious education to complement rather than contradict multicultural objectives.

Despite these efforts, persistent reliance on traditional evaluation systems remains a barrier. Current assessments primarily measure academic knowledge, leaving little space for evaluating growth in tolerance, empathy, or collaboration. Sangadji [7] stresses that multicultural education should also cultivate civic engagement and social responsibility, a point reinforced by international experiences where inclusive curricula and participatory learning are emphasized [13], [23] To address this gap, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive curriculum design, and conflict resolution becomes essential [5]. Without systematic professional development, teachers' commitment alone cannot sustain multicultural practices in religious-based schools.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the challenges faced by religious-based schools ranging from limited teacher capacity and resource constraints to tensions between faith and diversity reflect both structural and cultural barriers. Yet, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation. By interpreting Islamic teachings as universal values compatible with multicultural principles, teachers at the Islamic Center Foundation demonstrate that religious-based schools can simultaneously preserve faith and prepare students for participation in plural societies. This finding aligns with broader literature, which underscores the importance of teacher agency and institutional commitment in overcoming barriers to inclusive education [24], [25].

## **4 Conclusion**

This study concludes that religious-based schools face both opportunities and challenges in implementing multicultural education. At the Islamic Center Foundation of North Sumatra, teachers are positioned as the central figures in translating multicultural values into everyday learning practices. They act not only as instructors but also as mentors and role models who shape students' attitudes toward diversity. The school has demonstrated that devotion to religious identity can coexist with openness to pluralism through structured programs, cultural activities, and integration of civic values into religious teachings. However, challenges remain in the form of limited teacher readiness, lack of systematic training, resource constraints, and

the persistence of stereotypes carried from the students' family environments. These factors show that while progress has been made, the realization of inclusive and sustainable multicultural education still requires consistent reinforcement at both the classroom and institutional levels.

To strengthen the role of religious-based schools in promoting multicultural education, efforts should focus on enhancing the professional capacity of teachers through ongoing training in inclusive pedagogy and classroom management for diverse student groups. Curriculum innovation is also needed so that multicultural content is not treated as an addition but becomes integrated into core lessons, making learning more relevant to students' cultural contexts. Institutions must provide stronger support by allocating adequate resources, developing inclusive assessment systems, and ensuring that co-curricular activities consistently reinforce diversity as part of school life. In addition, collaboration with parents and communities should be expanded to align school values with those nurtured at home, thereby reducing the gap between school practices and students' everyday environments. By embedding these efforts into school culture, religious-based institutions can transform challenges into opportunities, preparing students to live harmoniously in a plural society without losing their religious identity.

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