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Minority, local tradition and Islam: Contextualizing multicultural education in Indonesian schools

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Abstract

The concept of multicultural education, advocating diversity, equality, and social justice, has been embraced by many educational institutions worldwide. However, local contexts can shape the specific policies and goals of multicultural education adopted and practiced. For example, two schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, implemented multicultural education not only in response to the global call for culturally diverse educational environments but also due to their unique socio-cultural backgrounds. A study revealed that factors such as affiliation to minority religions, driven to promote local cultures, and competition with schools of different socio-religious-political orientations played significant roles in shaping their approach to multicultural education. While promoting the awareness of the Indonesian socio-cultural and religious diversity, educating students with wisdom of the local culture, and recognizing their peculiar values within society, the policy stood as a response to the growing dominance of conservative Islamic discourses in the country's religious and ideological landscape.

Introduction

Multicultural education has been recognized as a crucial factor in reforming education systems in many countries to address diversity, persistent inequalities, and the need for social justice for all members of society. The widespread acceptance of this idea reflects a growing awareness of the important role of education in creating a more open, equal, and democratic society. Mass schooling policies are viewed as the primary means of preparing the next generation with the skills and knowledge to thrive and promote cooperation in culturally diverse environments (Banks, 2010; 2013). Despite the global consensus on its core principles and values, the development of multicultural education is influenced by the specific interests of each country or region, leading to various models, goals, and practices (Sutton, 2005; Cha, Gundara et al., 2017).

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In the early days of multicultural education in the US, it was initially perceived as an extension of the civil rights movement advocating for equality among Black Americans. Over time, it evolved to address issues related to educational access and curriculum reform across various school subjects (Banks, 2013). The concept of multicultural education has been interpreted differently in other countries. In Canada, it was linked to the bilingual nature of English and French descendants (Joshee et al., 2016). In Australia, it focused on the diverse cultures of new "non-White" immigrants (Lo Bianco, 2016). Meanwhile, in the UK, it sought to address social and economic stratification and the increasing ethnic, racial, and religious diversities in society (Tomlinson, 2009).

Based on the research of Cha, Ham, et al. (2017), the global embrace of multicultural education can be understood from three different perspectives: socio-cultural, economic, and world-polity. This adoption has been driven by the need to accommodate the existing and ongoing diversities in society (Sleeter, 2018; Lee et al., 2019). Countries with internal socio-cultural diversities are more likely to adopt multicultural education (see also Gradstein & Justman, 2002). The other two perspectives address the varying degrees of international connections established by countries, either for economic purposes or for building relationships with the global civil society. The adoption of multicultural education is economically motivated by countries eager to equip their workforce with multicultural competencies demanded in the global marketplace, or rationally pursued by countries deeply linked to the global education community (see Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Kenon & Palsole, 2019).

Recent studies on multicultural education development in Asian countries have revealed diverse motivations behind its adoption. In countries like India, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and China, where traditional ethnic, cultural, and religious diversities exist, multicultural education is seen as vital for managing differences and fostering social cohesion in society (Chakravarty, 2001; Jamil & Ismail, 2010; Ho, 2017; Arphattananon, 2018; Liu et al., 2020). Conversely, in ethnically homogenous countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, the growing awareness of global diversities has spurred the need to equip students with multicultural competencies demanded by the global job markets (Huang, 2001; Hirasawa, 2009; Hong, 2010; Grant & Ham, 2013; Okubo, 2017). Moreover, some argue that the established linkage with the international educational system has played a vital role in urging certain Asian countries to participate in this movement (Cha, Ham, et al., 2017).

In the early 2000s, Indonesia embarked on introducing multiculturalism and multicultural education to embrace the country's diverse cultural fabric. This initiative represents a modern interpretation of the 'plural society' concept, offering an opportunity to better manage diversities and strengthen the nation's social cohesion (Hefner, 2001; Suparlan, 2002). However, the integration of multicultural education into the national education system has encountered challenges due to the absence of clear official support (Al Makassary & Suparto, 2010). Despite these obstacles, acknowledging and celebrating cultural diversities through formal education is crucial for achieving lasting social unity and progress (Tilaar, 2004).

In 2003, the Indonesian Education Law mandated the incorporation of multicultural education without explicitly naming it (Raihani, 2014). Article 4 emphasized the necessity for education in the country to be conducted in a fair, democratic, and non-discriminatory manner while respecting human rights, religious values, cultural traditions, and national diversity. This commitment was further reflected in the 2006 national graduates' competencies, which stressed the importance of honoring the diversity of religion, culture, ethnicity, race, and socio-economic classes within the country. Consequently, multicultural education has been embraced and implemented in schools across various cities in Indonesia, including Jakarta, Medan, and Yogyakarta (Al Makassary & Suparto, 2010; Raihani, 2012).

Despite current challenges of ethno-religious and cultural polarizations, the adoption of multicultural education is not yet a mainstream movement in school policies and management. This hinders the development of openness, equality, and inclusive cooperation (Raihani, 2014). The exclusive model of religious education, compulsory for all pupils in the country, has limited understanding and respect for diverse beliefs, values, and traditions (Parker, 2014). This has resulted in parallel-like life paths for students from majority (Muslim) and minority (other religions) groups, with limited interaction and cooperation (Hoon, 2013). Indonesian educational practitioners tend to take a conservative stand on cultural conformity, harmonious society, and national unity, without addressing the significant polarization rooted in overlapping ethno-religious and social lines (Harjatanaya & Hoon, 2018).

The study sets out to explore the intricate ethno-religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape encompassing the integration of multicultural education in Indonesian schools. Despite the idea's widespread acceptance, the absence of a unified national education policy makes this investigation particularly pertinent.

The study uncovers diverse motivations, interpretations, and objectives of each school regarding the implementation of multicultural education in their educational policies, objectives, and curriculum. It provides a firsthand account of how multicultural education is practiced in Indonesian schools, shaped by local and national contexts, and driven by distinctive goals and objectives linked to socio-cultural and political backgrounds of schools that extend beyond promoting universal values of equality, diversity, and social justice.

Methodology

The research utilized an ethnographic-qualitative approach to study two private upper-secondary schools, the Virtuous Christian High School (VCHS) and the Woodworth Javanese High School (WJHS) (both pseudonyms), in Yogyakarta, an infamous and prominent student city in Indonesia. The fieldwork and data collection took place between September and November 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual visits to the schools' official websites were conducted throughout 2022–2023 for updates on news and developments. Both schools self-proclaimed as multicultural schools, with educational vision/mission, objectives, and curriculum that recognize diversity and promote equality in Indonesian society.

Participants

The study involved approximately 30 informants, including principals, vice principals, teachers, and students from the two schools. They were selected based on their understanding and implementation of multicultural education policies in the schools. The informants participated voluntarily and had the right to withdraw from the study, with their personal information guaranteed protection.

Data Collection

As a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach, the research collected documents from school archives regarding their multicultural education policies. Additionally, unstructured and/or semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants, and student and school activities related to the policies were observed during 2 to 3 weeks of daily visits to the schools.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data collected, the study followed the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further refined by Charmaz (2006) and Bryant and Charmaz (2019). The analysis was theoretically based on the growing diversity of multicultural education practices worldwide and how it is contextualized within the social-cultural context of Indonesian society, national education policies, and local school initiatives.

Results and Discussion

Minority and Javanese Tradition: The Tale of two 'Multicultural' Schools

The two schools under investigation epitomize the rare commitment to embracing multicultural education as their foundational policy. Both private institutions boast distinct socio-cultural backgrounds, which undoubtedly shape their dedication to promoting values of equality, inclusiveness, and openness. The Virtuous Christian High School (VCHS), a venerable establishment in the city, is affiliated with a minority religious educational institution established in 1945 and has historical ties to the Dutch Christian Mission (*Zending*) during the late colonial era. In contrast, the Woodworth Javanese High School (WJHS) is a nascent addition to the educational landscape, having been established in 2014 as part of an educational complex offering a comprehensive range of programs. This institution maintains an unofficial affiliation with the Yogyakarta Sultanate Court. Situated in Yogyakarta, a pivotal city in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, both schools operate within the unique governance framework of a Sultanate-monarchy, where the governor is selected from the royal lineage. The region is presently under the guidance of the reigning Sultan (Yaakub, 2014; Harsono, 2018).

VCHS was established in the 1950s when there were few high schools in the city and the country. It was highly popular and played a prominent role in providing upper secondary education nationwide (for example, Bjork, 2005). Historically, the students come from diverse ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds, including Javanese people, Christians, and residents of Yogyakarta. Many students are Muslims from regions outside Yogyakarta, such as Medan in North Sumatra and even Papua. The diversity of students reflects the multi-ethnic,

multi-religious, and multi-cultural nature of Indonesian society. Based on this unique history, the school has adopted a policy of multicultural education to accommodate the ethnic and religious diversities of its students while continuing its traditional missions as a minority, yet open, religious education institution. This educational policy is part of the school's vision, which is infused with Christian values of tolerance and efforts to recognize and preserve the socio-cultural diversities of Indonesian society.

The VCHS multicultural education policy centers on two key areas: (1) school management, development, and intra- and extra-curricular activities; and (2) communication with stakeholders to transform its image from a Christian minority-affiliated institution to a multicultural high school that celebrates and respects the diverse backgrounds of its students. With a rich historical backdrop and an inclusive mission, VCHS's evolution into a multicultural high school is propelled by its desire to welcome students from various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, transcending geographical boundaries. This policy serves as a pivotal aspect of the school's student admission strategy in Yogyakarta's fiercely competitive educational landscape. By embracing a multicultural identity, VCHS offers a distinctive appeal to prospective students from diverse ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds.

The decision to embrace multicultural education at WJHS is driven by a diverse range of reasons and objectives. Many of the school's founders have a wealth of experience working in civil society organizations advocating for democracy, pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and equal access to education. Additionally, some have been actively involved in international projects aimed at enhancing education quality and expanding educational opportunities within the country. As a result of these experiences, the school has been intentionally designed to align with prominent issues and trends in the global educational landscape, particularly in addressing diversity through the advancement of multicultural and inclusive education. This global perspective is evident in WJHS's adoption of the International Curriculum, specifically the Cambridge Secondary for ages 14–16 with IGCSE qualification, in conjunction with the mandatory 2013 national Indonesian curriculum. The decision to embrace multicultural education stems from the school's commitment to embracing and integrating global educational approaches (cf. Cha, Ham, et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, the strong ties with the sultanate of Yogyakarta, recognized as the primary guardian of the syncretic Javanese Islam, have significantly influenced the adoption of multicultural education in WJHS. As described by Geertz (1971), 'syncretic Islam' embodies a distinct variant of Islam practiced by Javanese Muslims, incorporating deep-rooted local traditions associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs. This unique cultural expression of Islam has faced considerable societal, political, and religious pressures amidst the growing Islamization in Indonesian society since the 1990s (Hefner, 2011; Ricklefs, 2012. The multicultural education at WJHS can be interpreted as a proactive response to the imperative of preserving and promoting the inclusive, cosmopolitan values of Islamic Javanese culture within the diverse Indonesian society, characterized by its rich ethnic and religious tapestry.

The decision of both schools to adopt a multicultural education policy is deeply rooted in their core values and mission, as well as the necessity to remain competitive in the city's education landscape. The attractiveness of these schools has waned due to the increasing popularity of Islamic-affiliated private schools and traditional Islamic religious schools (*madrasas*), which have been actively promoting Islamization since the rise of the Muslim middle class in the 1990s (Hefner, 2008; Tayeb, 2018). It is no mere coincidence that both VCHS and WJHS are committed to embracing and promoting ethno-cultural and religious diversity, especially in the face of ongoing societal and ideological challenges within Indonesia's diverse society during the democratic era (Hefner, 2018).

It appears that some minority groups at VCHS and WJHS in Indonesia have adopted a self-proclaimed identity as multicultural schools as a means of survival among the dominant mainstream Muslim society. They advocate for equal rights to participate and contribute within the competitive education landscape of Yogyakarta. While multiculturalism and multicultural education are widely accepted nationally, they have not been officially sanctioned by the government (Raihani, 2014; 2018). However, only schools affiliated with minority groups, like VCHS and WJHS, have embraced them as primary educational policies and objectives (Hoon, 2013; Harjatanaya & Hoon, 2018). This indicates that multicultural education is more necessary and demanded by minorities in the name of equality and diversity, rather than by the majority Islam-affiliated schools (Alam, 2017; see also Holm & Londen, 2010).

Ways to Accommodate: Religions and Cultures

The two schools have developed quite different models and forms of multicultural education influenced by their diverse socio-cultural, religious backgrounds, and societal roles in the city of Yogyakarta. According to its official school vision, VCHS aims to establish a tolerant Christian school by recognizing the diversity of Indonesian society, preserving local cultures and traditions, and achieving global competitiveness. It is important to note the term 'the plurality' or *kemajemukan* (in Bahasa Indonesia), which refers to Furnivall's concept of the plural colonial Indonesian society characterized by ethno-religious, racial, and cultural divisions (Hefner, 2001; Suparlan, 2002). This term is instrumental in defining the school's agenda. The plural nature of Indonesian society presents both opportunities and challenges for the country in maintaining unity, peace, and harmony. VCHS sees itself as a microcosm of the country, facing similar challenges and goals of preserving unity and harmony amidst persistent internal diversity. This idea shapes the school's approach to multicultural education through the recognition and accommodation of students' and staff's differences in terms of religion, ethnicity, and social class, promoting equality, mutual understanding, and cooperation in academic and social life.

The school's commitment to providing equal education access for a diverse population is evident in its policy of accepting students from different ethno-religious backgrounds. This commitment extends to the employment of teachers and support staff with diverse backgrounds. In 2019, records showed a student population with approximately 20 percent Muslims, less than 2 percent Hindus/Buddhists, and many Christians. Additionally, around one-third of the students came from regions outside the province of Yogyakarta. This approach mirrors practices common among minority ethnic/religion-affiliated schools in Indonesia (Mujiburrahman, 2006).

The VCHS multicultural education policy proactively addresses the diverse religious needs of students and fosters an inclusive understanding of Indonesia's ethno-religious cultural diversities. In line with the Indonesian national education law, the school provides exclusive religious education for students based on their officially recognized religions, such as Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Students are also accommodated to participate in rituals and other religious/cultural events, with the school ensuring the safety and support of male Muslim students attending the Friday prayer at nearby mosques. Additionally, a thoughtful provision of a multi-prayer room demonstrates the school's commitment to providing a conducive environment for non-Christian students, teachers, and staff to practice their daily prayers.

There are also several other in/out school activities aimed to facilitate students' learning of diversified ethno-religious traditions that exist within the plural Indonesian society. While visiting the school-affiliated church scheduled regularly for all students, the school facilitates visits to mosques, temples and shrines; meetings and dialogues with local religious leaders; and runs annual retreats/live-in programs with families of different ethnic, religious and social class backgrounds. There is also an annual cultural festival, usually held at the end of the second semester, in which students are grouped to perform in various singing, dancing or play contests representing the diverse ethnic-cultural traditions of Indonesian society. It is suggested that students choose from ethnic-cultural traditions not their own to learn and build a sort of multicultural understanding of the societal diversities of the country. On the final day of the festival, students (and teachers and support staff) wear various ethno-traditional dresses representing the ethnic-cultural diversities of the nation.

The implementation of multicultural education at WJHS shares some key similarities with that of VCHS, as both institutions are dedicated to acknowledging and accommodating the diverse differences within today's Indonesian society in their educational policies and management. However, there are variations in how the policy is executed at the practical level. WJHS prefers to promote diversity, or *keberagaman* (in Bahasa Indonesia), instead of plurality or *kemajemukan* as used by VCHS. Additionally, WJHS emphasizes inclusive education by recognizing not only ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural differences but also students with disabilities in its educational system. The school prioritizes providing an open, democratic, and globally driven education, with the belief that every student is unique. Ultimately, the primary goal of the school is to create a teaching and learning environment tailored to the development of each student's potential. These progressive viewpoints shape the school's multicultural education policies.

The school's approach to religious education is progressive. While meeting the national requirement for religious education, the school promotes religious pluralism. This has raised some controversy as it is seen to challenge the truth-claims of specific religions,

which led to a ban imposed by the Indonesian Council of Ulema in 2012 (Basya, 2011; Feener, 2014). However, the school considers religious pluralism a core value and requires both students and parents to adhere to it. During the induction period, all students are (1) offered to take a religious education course but will have the freedom to choose any religion – of six recognized by the state – they are interested in learning; and (2) urged to participate in all religious festivals celebrated in the school aside of their own. Parents and students are expected to comply with the rules during their study time at WJHS. As confirmed during the fieldwork, however, it is very uncommon for students to take a religious education course outside their own; even though they are eagerly participating in religious festivals of all state-recognized religions as part of the annual school programs.

WJHS has a distinctive approach to recognizing the ethno-cultural diversities of Indonesia. Being a relatively new school with most students from the city of Yogyakarta and the suburbs, there is relatively low ethnic-social mixing compared to VCHS. The school's multicultural policy focuses on fostering students' pride in and understanding of the cosmopolitan Javanese cultures, rather than emphasizing the celebration of the ethnic-cultural diversities of the entire Indonesian society. This is not a coincidence, as the school is in the southern suburb area of the city, with numerous Javanese cultural and heritage centers that regularly host traditional singing festivals, shadow puppet shows or *Wayang*, Javanese plays or *Kethoprak*, Javanese orchestra or *Gamelan*, and so on. The school regularly organizes off-school activities to visit these centers, encouraging students to enjoy various cultural performances and facilitating extra-curricular programs to learn and train themselves in Javanese traditional songs, dances, plays, and musical instruments. It is understood that having good knowledge and pride in the Javanese cultures, as the majority ethnic group of students, along with awareness of the ethnocultural diversity of Indonesia, are expected to foster students' multicultural understandings and skills.

The emphasis on religions and cultures in implementing multicultural education at both VCHS and WJHS is essential, given its significant impact on shaping Indonesian society. The schools' affiliation with a minority religious group and the traditional Javanese cultural institution underscores the relevance of this focus. Indonesia's diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural landscape has posed a formidable challenge to national integration and cooperation, especially considering past conflicts in 1965–6 and the late 1990s (Van Klinken, 2007; Wieringa & Katjasungkana, 2018), as well as recurrent attacks targeting minority religious groups and recent religio-political polarization during the last two presidential elections (Warburton, 2020; Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2021). It is understandable why the diversity of religions and cultures has been considered the main focus of implementing multicultural education across schools in Indonesia (Jayadi et al., 2022; Raihani, 2014, 2018), which follows the inward-looking pattern of adaption of multicultural education in ethno-cultural plural countries to foster integration and cohesion (Arphattananon, 2018; Ho, 2017; Liu et al., 2020).

Confronting Religious Conservativism: A Hidden Agenda

The efforts to promote religious pluralism in the practice of multicultural education by both schools can be seen as part of the ongoing religious, cultural, and ideological contestations, particularly in the fight against the rise of religious conservatism (Hefner 2018; Ricklefs, 2012). In the field of education, this battle has been obvious in the last decade. School environments and cultures, including state-owned public schools, have been mainstreamed with rather exclusive Islamic religious values, while there have also been efforts to promote tolerance and cooperation between students across different ethno-religious lines (Wijaya Mulya & Aditomo, 2019). Both schools have been keenly aware of this contestation and its effects on the social and cultural environments of high schools around the city and the country. The adoption of multicultural education in their educational objectives and management reflects an intention to respond in a more positive manner. However, the two schools have shown different approaches and goals, based on their distinct socio-cultural backgrounds and institutional affiliations in society.

VCHS has been dedicated to promoting religious pluralism, considering its historical roots as a Dutch-colonial Christian missionary institution aimed at educating young Indonesian Muslims (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). While the presence of Muslim students in the school has remained steady, the reemergence of Islam necessitates a conscientious response. The school's minority religious affiliation has influenced its multicultural education policy, which emphasizes recognizing ethnocultural differences and accommodating diverse religious practices among students and staff (see previous section).

During our fieldwork, we discovered that the school principal and senior teachers were hesitant to acknowledge the influence of the school's multicultural education policy on the ongoing religious-ideological challenges linked to the rise of Islamic/religious conservatism in education (Hefner 2018; Ricklefs, 2012). Over the past 30 years, the educational landscape of private high schools in Yogyakarta has transformed, with a growing number of Muslim students and the emergence of competitive Islamic-affiliated private schools (Alam, 2017; Wijaya Mulya, & Aditomo, 2019). The increasing demand for high-quality education by educated Muslim middle-class families has boosted the popularity of minority religion-affiliated schools. Through its multicultural education policy, VCHS not only aims to address the historical stigma of Christianization but also takes a political stance in preserving an open, pluralistic, equal, and democratic Indonesian society. This approach ensures the school's survival in the competitive high school educational market.

WJHS takes a much clearer stance compared to VCHS. While VCHS has historical burdens in the country's socio-politico-religious landscape, WJHS does not share the same challenges. However, its unofficial link to the Yogyakarta Sultanate Court, known as the guardian of the heterodox Javanese Islamic tradition, adds complexity to its story. The religious and cultural groups to which the school belongs find themselves in a precarious position due to the dominance of Islamic resurgence in the country's public life. Despite not directly addressing the prevailing religious conservativism in high schools, WJHS was established with the mission to champion values of equality, diversity, and religious pluralism. This was articulated by Bu Suyatmi (pseudonym), the school's headmaster.

"When we founded the school, there was no motivation to offer such an alternative school (of the existing exclusive Islamic-affiliated private schools); but only to build a school that promotes the value of difference by recognizing and promoting cultural diversities and religious pluralism. However, we must acknowledge that many parents consider our school as an alternative for those who want to send their kids to a non-religiously affiliated educational institution and to study in a religiously and culturally plural environment. We call it just a bonus for our effort so far."

The strong stance on religious pluralism taken by WJHS poses a significant challenge to the growing influence of Islamic religious conservatism and exclusivism, especially in secondary-level education. Embracing multicultural education can be viewed as a means to counter the increasing dominance of Islamic conservatism by supporting marginalized local and Indigenous Islamic groups, such as the heterodox Javanese Islam (Hefner, 2011), while promoting a more inclusive form of Islam in the country (Fauzan & Rohmadi, 2021). This approach represents a shift in multicultural education from addressing ethnic-racial discrimination and marginalization to striving for education equality and equity, now aiming to confront the global rise of religious conservatism and radicalism (Gorski, 2006; R'boul, 2021; Torres & Tarozzi, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The implementation of multicultural education in Indonesian schools has been largely influenced by the local-national dynamic, which is shaped by ongoing internal ethno-cultural and religious diversity and contestation during the country's democratization. Despite the growing dominance of the mainstream Islamic tradition in education, schools affiliated with minority religions and local indigenous groups are likely to adopt multicultural education to assert their position and contribute to the country's educational landscape. There has been an emphasis on adapting educational policies and programs to accommodate the diversity of religious traditions and promote different cultures, including local indigenous ones that exist within the country. The contextualized goal to promote openness, and equality and foster social integration has been eventually challenged by the increasing religious conservativism currently polarizing the ethno-culturally and religious diverse Indonesian society. Considering its values and advantages to foster inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding of students in a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious country, stakeholders of Indonesian education should take into account multicultural education as part of the very principle of educational policy and programs now and in the future.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest with the two institutions and informants involved in the study.

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