

ANALYSIS OF THE INCLUSION MODEL IN FOSTERING MULTICULTURAL VALUES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' DIVERSITY CHARACTER IN RELIGION-BASED ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN MEDAN

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 22-06-2026

Revised : 18-07-2026

Accepted : 30-08-2026

KEYWORDS

*Diversity Character,
Inclusion Model,
Multicultural Values,*

ABSTRACT

Faith-based elementary schools in religiously diverse cities face the dual challenge of instilling religious values while cultivating openness to difference, yet studies specifically examining how an inclusion model is applied to build multicultural values across different religious school settings within a single city remain limited. This study analyzes the implementation of an inclusion model for fostering multicultural values and strengthening students' diversity character in faith-based elementary schools in Medan City. A qualitative multisite case study design was used at SD Muhammadiyah 36 Medan, SD Methodist 9 Medan, SD Antonius V Medan, and Bodhicitta School Medan, with principals, teachers, and students as the main participants and parents as supporting informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and questionnaires, then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, with trustworthiness established through source, technique, and time triangulation. Findings show that the inclusion model is applied through diversity-respecting school policies, integration of multicultural values into the curriculum, an inclusive school culture, teacher role modeling, and intracurricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities, and that this implementation is associated with stronger tolerance, empathy, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution among students. The study contributes a conceptual model of inclusion-based multicultural values development that positions principal leadership as the policy driver, teachers as facilitators of inclusive learning, school culture as the medium of value internalization, and stakeholder collaboration as the key factor in strengthening students' diversity character

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as one of the most diverse countries in the world. According to data from the (Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, 2023), Indonesia has more than 1,300 ethnic groups and six officially recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This diversity is reflected in the motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*," meaning "Unity in Diversity." However, amidst this diversity, Indonesia still faces social challenges in the form of intolerance and discrimination between groups. A survey by (Setara Institute, 2023) the even showed that some students in Indonesia still display exclusive attitudes toward groups of different religions or beliefs. This situation indicates the need for educational strategies that can shape students' character and foster mutual respect amidst diversity.

Religious-based elementary schools, whether Islamic, Christian, Catholic, or Buddhist, have a dual responsibility in the educational process. On the one hand, these schools play a crucial role in instilling specific religious teachings and values; on the other hand, they also have an obligation to develop national values, tolerance, and multiculturalism so that students not only have faith but are also able to live in harmony with followers of other religions. An analysis of the dynamics of elementary education in Indonesia shows that strengthening students' diverse character has not fully gone hand in hand with fostering inclusive multicultural values, particularly in religious-based schools, which in practice still emphasize strengthening internal religious identities rather than developing inclusive attitudes toward differences.

In this study, the term "inclusion model" is not used in the sense of inclusion for students with special needs as is common in inclusive education literature, but rather is operationally defined as a school management approach that positions the diversity of religion, ethnicity, culture, and social status of students as an integral part of policies, curriculum, school culture, and learning practices, rather than as a threat to the school's religious identity. The inclusion model is seen as an approach that positions diversity as an integral part of the educational process, rather than as a threat to religious identity. (Ridho & Tumin, 2022) emphasize that inclusion-based multicultural education is able to bridge religious values and social and humanitarian values, so that students can grow as individuals who are both religious and inclusive. In line with this, Dharma (2020) states that a religion-based character development model in elementary schools must be integrated into the curriculum, school culture, and habituation activities, with teachers acting as facilitators of cross-identity dialogue. Medan City was chosen as the research location because it is known to have high ethnic and religious diversity, with a society consisting of Batak, Nias, Malay, Javanese, Chinese, and various other groups, making it a relevant context for studying the development of inclusion-based multicultural values.

The study of character education cannot be separated from the concept of character education proposed by (Lickona, 1992), who emphasized that character education should integrate three main dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Moral knowing relates to the ability to understand moral values and distinguish between right and wrong; moral feeling refers to the affective dimension such as empathy and respect that encourages a person to act according to moral values; while moral action is the concrete manifestation of these two dimensions in everyday behavior (Narvaez & Rest, 1995; Purwati et al., 2024). In the scope of multicultural education, these three dimensions include the ability to understand cultural differences, have empathy for other groups, and act fairly and respect diversity. (Kurniawan & Fitriyani, 2023) emphasized that character education developed based on multicultural values can build cross-religious and cultural awareness, so that students are not only academically intelligent but also socially and emotionally mature.

(Ridho & Tumin, 2022) explain that multicultural education is a systematic effort to address social and cultural conflict through a learning process that instills respect for diversity. Multicultural education is not simply about introducing differences, but also about fostering positive attitudes toward diversity and developing the ability to coexist peacefully. In the Indonesian context, multicultural education is highly relevant for implementation in faith-based schools, given that students in these environments often grow up in relatively homogeneous communities and are not widely exposed to differences in belief. While various previous studies have discussed multicultural education in general, research specifically analyzing the application of inclusive models in fostering multicultural values in faith-based elementary schools, particularly those comparing multiple religious backgrounds within a single city, remains limited. This gap underlies the importance of this research.

Based on the description, this research is formulated to answer four questions, namely: (1) how is the implementation of the inclusion model used in religious-based elementary schools in Medan City; (2) how is the inclusion model applied in fostering multicultural values in students; (3) what are the implications of implementing the inclusion model on students' attitudes and behavior; and (4) how is the strengthening of students' diversity character as a result of implementing the inclusion model. This research aims to analyze these four aspects while producing a conceptual model for fostering

multicultural values based on inclusion that is suitable for implementation in religious-based elementary schools. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of multicultural education and character education based on inclusion; practically, this research is expected to be a reference for teachers, school principals, and educational policy makers in designing programs for fostering diversity values in religious-based elementary schools.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the process of fostering diversity values that occurs in the natural context of a faith-based elementary school, in line with (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) view that qualitative research allows researchers to interpret the meaning of phenomena based on participants' perspectives holistically. The multi-site design was used so that the findings are not only applicable to one school, but can be compared across schools with different characteristics, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding and strengthening the validity of the findings through cross-case comparison (Yin, 2017).

Table 1. Research Locations

School	Religious Background	Characteristics
Muhammadiyah Elementary School 36 Medan	Islam	Accreditation A; Independent Curriculum; Tahfidz, Tilawah, Scouts/Hizbul Wathon activities
Antonius V Elementary School Medan	Catholic	Accreditation A; Independent Curriculum; extracurricular activities: Scouts, choir, traditional dance, English Club
Methodist 9 Elementary School Medan	Protestant	Co-curricular activities include joint prayer, mutual cooperation; extracurricular activities include scouting, dance, spirituality
Bodhicitta Elementary School Medan	Buddha	Established in 2001; Accredited A; Curriculum 2013; spiritual and literacy activities

Source: Observation Results, 2026

The research subjects included the principal, homeroom teacher, and religious education teacher as primary informants, as well as students and parents as supporting informants, who were selected using a purposive sampling technique, namely selecting informants who were considered to have in-depth knowledge of the process of fostering diversity values in schools (Sugiyono, 2019). Data sources consisted of primary data (results of participatory observation, interviews, documentation of school activities, and questionnaires) and secondary data (curriculum documents, religious and character education guidebooks, activity reports, and the school's vision and mission).

Data collection techniques included participatory observation of student interaction patterns and the role of teachers in managing diversity; semi-structured in-depth interviews with a rapport approach focused on the inclusion model, fostering multicultural values through extracurricular activities and school culture, and their implications for students' diverse character; documentation in the form of photos of the school's vision and mission, curriculum, and activities; and a two-category Likert-scale questionnaire (Yes/No) as quantitative supporting data that strengthens the qualitative findings. Data validity was obtained through source triangulation (comparing information from the principal, teachers, students, and documents), technical triangulation (combining observations, interviews, and documentation), and time triangulation (collecting data at different times).

The interviews in this study were directed at five main domains, namely: (1) the school's vision and policies in shaping students' character who value diversity; (2) activities carried out by the school to foster an inclusive attitude in understanding differences in religion, ethnicity, and culture; (3) fostering multicultural values through extracurricular activities and school culture; (4) how the school instills the value of diversity without reducing religious identity; and (5) changes in student attitudes and the informant's expectations regarding strengthening the character of diversity through religious education in schools. Interviews were recorded with the informant's permission and transcribed verbatim to maintain data accuracy, then clarified again with the informant at the final stage of the interview.

Data analysis uses the interactive model of (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which includes three stages, namely data condensation (sorting and grouping data according to the theme of development strategies, implementation of diversity values, supporting factors, and obstacles), data presentation (arranged in the form of tables, narratives, and comparison matrices between schools), as well as drawing conclusions and verification through cross-case thematic analysis to produce comprehensive findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Inclusion Model in Religion-Based Elementary Schools in Medan City

Interviews with principals, classroom teachers, and religious education teachers at the four schools revealed that the inclusive model is implemented through school policies that provide equal opportunities to all students regardless of religious background, ethnicity, culture, or social status. The principals emphasized that diversity is part of the educational reality and must be managed positively through programs that foster tolerance and a harmonious life. Classroom teachers implement the inclusive model by forming heterogeneous study groups, while religious education teachers emphasize universal religious values such as compassion, respect, justice, and brotherhood, rather than simply strengthening individual religious identities.

Observations show that student interactions are inclusive, without any religious grouping. This finding is supported by documentation of school regulations and questionnaire results, which indicate that the majority of students feel comfortable making friends and working together with students from diverse backgrounds. Analyzing the inclusive education theory of (Ainscow, 2005), these findings indicate that the school has implemented the principles of increasing participation and reducing exclusion. These findings are also relevant to (Banks, 1994) perspective on the five dimensions of multicultural education (content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and empowering school culture), as well as to (Tilaar, 2004) and (Parekh, 2002) perspectives on the recognition of plurality, social equality, and intercultural dialogue. These findings align with research by Huda et al. (2023), which found that multicultural education in faith-based schools develops effectively when supported by an inclusive school culture. Therefore, the inclusion model implemented in the four schools can be categorized as an integrative inclusion model that combines policy, learning, school culture, role models, and habituation.

Inclusion Model in Fostering Multicultural Values

The development of multicultural values in the four schools is implemented through the integration of tolerance, respect for diversity, cooperation, empathy, justice, and democratic attitudes into intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. At the intracurricular level, multicultural values are integrated into subjects such as Religious Education, Pancasila Education, and Arts and Culture through discussions, group work, and presentations. At the co-curricular level, the schools implement habits of communal prayer, literacy, mutual cooperation, and commemoration of national and religious holidays. At the extracurricular level, activities such as scouting, traditional dance, choir, and English Club provide a means of interaction across backgrounds that strengthen the internalization of values naturally.

When linked to the theory of multicultural value development, these findings indicate that the implemented inclusion model meets the components of integration, coherence, consistency, participation, school culture, and civic competence. These findings align with (Fausi, 2020) research, which found that the internalization of multicultural values in faith-based schools is achieved through an inclusive religious culture, and (Sulaiman Ismail & Sulaiman W, 2023) research, which concluded that the integration of multicultural values into religious learning strengthens religious moderation and tolerance. Masdul's (2023) research also emphasizes the strategic role of teachers as agents of change through pedagogical strategies oriented toward justice and respect for diversity. The success of multicultural value development in these four schools can be explained by the consistency of school policies, the exemplary behavior of principals and teachers, and the repeated practice across levels of activity, so that multicultural values are not only taught cognitively but also directly experienced by students in daily interactions. This consistency and repetition—not simply the availability of programs—distinguishes the practices of these four schools from merely ceremonial value development. Thus, the development of multicultural values in religious-based elementary schools in Medan City is implemented through an integrated learning approach, habituation, role modelling, school culture, and religious activities.

Implications of Implementing an Inclusion Model on Student Attitudes and Behavior

The implementation of the inclusive model is indicated to be related to the development of students' attitudes and behavior in a more positive direction. The principal stated that the consistently implemented coaching program creates a harmonious school environment, while the homeroom teacher reported that students demonstrated improved abilities to work

together, respect opinions, and resolve differences through good communication. Observations supported these findings: students from diverse backgrounds interacted actively, helped each other, and managed interpersonal conflicts through dialogue and deliberation rather than confrontational actions. The questionnaire results also showed that the majority of students felt comfortable making friends across religions and ethnicities and were willing to work together in heterogeneous groups.

Analyzed through (Banks, 1994) multicultural education theory, these findings demonstrate the success of the educational process in reducing social prejudice and implementing equity pedagogy. From (Ainscow, 2005) perspective, these attitudinal changes indicate that the school has successfully fostered a sense of belonging in students towards the school community. These results align with research by (Celina et al., 2025) who found a positive influence of multicultural education on elementary school students' religious tolerance, research by Mahemi et al. (2023) on the contribution of internalizing multicultural values to the formation of social character, and research by (Dirgahayu & Hanum, 2024) who emphasized that a school environment that values diversity fosters inclusive behavior and improves the quality of social relationships among students.

Strengthening Students' Diversity Character

The implementation of an inclusive model in fostering multicultural values is indicated to contribute to strengthening students' diversity character, which is reflected in the development of tolerance, respect for diversity, social empathy, cooperation, unity, democratic attitudes, and the ability to live side by side in harmony. The principal explained that all school activities are directed at building students' awareness that differences in religion, ethnicity, culture, and social background are part of the nation's wealth that must be respected together. The religious teacher added that strengthening diversity character occurs through the internalization of universal religious values that emphasize compassion, brotherhood, and respect for fellow human beings.

Based on the results of the cross-case analysis, the researcher concluded that the inclusion model applied in religious-based elementary schools in Medan City is an integrative-holistic inclusion model that simultaneously develops students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects through habituation, role modeling, social experiences, and a supportive school culture. These findings are formulated into a conceptual model as presented in Table 2. Processually, the model describes the following flow: the principal's leadership forms inclusive school policies, these policies are translated by teachers into daily learning, habituation, and role modeling; the school culture formed from these practices strengthens the internalization of multicultural values in students; and students' social experiences in interacting across backgrounds ultimately contribute to the formation of a diverse character. With this flow, the principal acts as a policy driver, teachers as implementers of inclusive learning, school culture as a medium for internalizing values, and collaboration among all school members as a reinforcement of students' diverse character.

Table 2. Conceptual Model of Inclusion-Based Multicultural Values Development

Component	Process	Output
Headmaster	Inclusive school policy makers	The formation of an inclusive education system
Teacher	Learning, habituation, role model, mentoring	Internalization of multicultural values
School Culture	Friendly environment, equality, respect for differences, harmonious interactions	Strengthening multicultural experiences
Multicultural Values	Tolerance, empathy, cooperation, justice, democracy, respect for diversity	Changes in student attitudes and behavior
Student	Respecting differences, caring for others, cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution	Character of diversity

Source: Data Processed by the Author

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors and Comparisons Between Schools

A cross-case analysis of the four schools revealed relatively consistent patterns as well as distinct variations across religious backgrounds. Muhammadiyah 36 Elementary School, Medan, emphasized the integration of diversity values

through the practice of worship and the Habits of Great Indonesian Children movement, which remains open to students with special needs. Antonius V Elementary School, Medan, and Methodist 9 Elementary School, Medan, emphasized character building through co-curricular activities such as group prayer, literacy, and community service involving students from various backgrounds. Meanwhile, Bodhicitta School, Medan, with a majority Buddhist student body but also Muslim, Christian, and Hindu students, demonstrated the practice of mutual respect for interfaith worship directly in daily learning activities, for example through the practice of respecting students who are fasting. This variation confirms that the inclusion model is not applied uniformly, but is adapted to the context and religious identity of each school, although still directed towards the same goal: strengthening the character of diversity. When compared across several dimensions, the four schools show similarities in the school policy dimension, namely that all place respect for diversity as part of official policy, as well as in the role of teachers as the main drivers of habituation and role models in the classroom. Differences are more apparent in the dimension of learning practices and religious activities: Muhammadiyah Elementary School 36 Medan emphasizes the habituation of daily worship, Antonius Elementary School V Medan and Methodist Elementary School 9 Medan emphasize joint co-curricular activities such as prayer and community service, while Bodhicitta School Medan emphasizes direct respect for the religious practices of interfaith students in daily activities. In the dimension of interfaith interaction, the four schools are relatively equal in facilitating heterogeneous study groups and extracurricular activities, while in the dimension of parental involvement, support appears to be more indirect support—through approval of school policies—rather than active involvement in designing programs, so this aspect provides room for strengthening for the four schools going forward. This dimension-based comparison demonstrates that the multi-site design in this study produces a comparative analysis, not simply four case descriptions combined.

Supporting factors for the successful implementation of the inclusive model include principal leadership support, teacher commitment, foundation involvement, parental support, a conducive school culture, and collaboration among school members. Conversely, identified inhibiting factors include the influence of family parenting styles and the home environment that may not align with the values taught at school, limited facilities and infrastructure, differences in individual student character, and varying communication and social adaptation skills. Findings regarding these inhibiting factors emphasize the importance of ongoing collaboration between schools, families, and the community so that the multicultural values fostered in schools can be continuously strengthened and maintained when students are outside the school environment.

This study has several limitations that require attention. First, the study was conducted only in four religious-based elementary schools in Medan City, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of a qualitative approach makes the data highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation, although triangulation was performed to maintain objectivity. Third, this study focuses on the school environment and does not fully examine the influence of family and community on the development of students' diverse character.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the inclusion model implemented in four religious-based elementary schools in Medan City, namely Muhammadiyah Elementary School 36 Medan, Antonius Elementary School V Medan, Methodist Elementary School 9 Medan, and Bodhicitta School Medan, is an integrative inclusion model that combines school policies, teacher roles, school culture, role models, and habituation. Multicultural values are fostered through the integration of tolerance, respect for diversity, cooperation, empathy, justice, and democratic attitudes into intracurricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities. The implementation of this model is indicated to be related to strengthening tolerance, cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution, and students' diverse character. The main contribution of this research is a conceptual model for fostering inclusion-based multicultural values that positions the principal's leadership as the policy driver, teachers as implementers of inclusive learning, school culture as a medium for internalizing values, and collaboration among school members as a reinforcement of students' diverse character. Given that this research was only conducted in four schools in Medan City, the model cannot be automatically generalized and should be positioned as an initial reference for other faith-based elementary schools in developing inclusive policies, rather than as a universally applicable model. Practically, these findings suggest the need for schools to formulate explicit inclusive policies, teachers to develop learning that opens up spaces for dialogue about diversity, and strengthening collaboration between schools, families, and the community. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of locations and examine in more depth the influence of family and community environments on the formation of students' diverse character.

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