Character Education in a Multicultural Context: Strategies for Strengthening Values of Tolerance in Schools

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Abstract

Schools in Indonesia increasingly reflect a multicultural social reality characterized by religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In this context, character education is often positioned as a key instrument for strengthening tolerance. However, character education practices are not always effective when implemented normatively and uniformly without considering the social dynamics of multicultural schools. This study aims to analyze strategies for strengthening tolerance values through character education in multicultural school settings and to explore the social and pedagogical dynamics shaping students' tolerance. A qualitative approach was employed using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in schools with a clear multicultural background. The findings indicate that character education is effective when implemented contextually and dialogically through the integration of tolerance values into daily learning, cross-identity social interactions, and inclusive school culture. Teachers act as value mediators, while tolerance is constructed through social negotiation rather than value indoctrination. Nevertheless, the implementation of multicultural character education faces structural challenges, including differences between family and school values, implicit bias, limited teacher capacity, and symbolic policy implementation. This study highlights the importance of reflective and adaptive approaches in character education to sustainably strengthen tolerance in multicultural school contexts.

Keywords: Character Education; Multiculturalism; School Culture; Tolerance; Values

Introduction

Schools in Indonesia increasingly represent a multicultural social reality in terms of religion, ethnicity, culture, and language. This condition is a consequence of demographic dynamics, social mobility, and educational policies that encourage encounters across identities within a single formal learning space (Lestari & Sa'adah, 2021; Sanur & Dermawan, 2023). On the one hand, such diversity holds significant potential as a source of social learning and the strengthening of national character. On the other hand, it also generates serious challenges in the form of intolerance, social exclusion, and identity-based conflict within educational settings. A number of studies indicate that schools are not entirely free from prejudices based on religion, ethnicity, and culture, which often manifest in students' social relations as well as

in pedagogical practices that are insufficiently sensitive to difference (Hamidah, 2024; Firmansyah et al., 2025).

In responding to this phenomenon, character education is often positioned as a normative solution for instilling values of tolerance and mutual respect in schools. Character education is regarded as a strategic instrument for shaping students' ethical character, civility, and capacity to coexist within a plural society (Sanur & Dermawan, 2023). Nevertheless, various empirical studies show that the implementation of character education does not always operate effectively in multicultural contexts. Character education is frequently reduced to policy documents, moral slogans, or ceremonial activities that fail to engage with the real social dynamics of schools, resulting in tolerance values that are not fully internalized in students' behavior (Maulana et al., 2024; Tahir et al., 2024).

From an academic perspective, studies on character education are still dominated by normative and conceptual approaches that emphasize the importance of universal moral values without sufficiently examining how these values are constructed and negotiated in everyday educational practice (Yulianti, 2023; Mashuri, 2021). Many previous studies have focused primarily on the quantitative measurement of tolerance attitudes or on analyses of curricula and character education policies (Hamidah, 2024; Manurung et al., 2024). While such approaches provide a general picture of tolerance levels, they have not been able to explain the social and pedagogical processes through which tolerant attitudes are formed in concrete interactions among students and between students and teachers.

The practical urgency of this issue becomes more pronounced as schools confront the reality of diverse family values and cultural backgrounds among students. Teachers often find themselves in a dilemma between instilling universal values of character education and respecting the cultural identities and beliefs that students bring from their families and communities (Hakim & Muhid, 2025). Without contextual and reflective pedagogical strategies, character education risks becoming a practice of value homogenization that instead reinforces resistance, implicit bias, and latent conflict in multicultural schools (Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

Previous research on multicultural education has emphasized the importance of the roles played by schools, teachers, and school culture in fostering tolerance and mutual respect (Arfaton et al., 2025; Muthalib et al., 2025). However, most of these studies still position tolerance as an end result rather than as a dynamic social process. The lived experiences of educational actors such as teachers and students, as well as the everyday interactional practices through which tolerance is shaped, remain relatively underexplored through in-depth qualitative approaches (Firmansyah et al., 2025; Nasution & Fauzan, 2025). Based on these conditions, there is a research gap in the form of a lack of qualitative studies that analyze actual character education strategies in multicultural school contexts along with the dynamics and challenges of their implementation. This study offers novelty by presenting an in-depth qualitative analysis of character education as a social and pedagogical practice embedded in the daily life of multicultural schools. The focus of the study is directed toward the process of internalizing tolerance values, the role of teachers as value mediators, and the dynamics of social interaction and school culture that shape students' tolerance. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze strategies for strengthening tolerance values through character education in multicultural schools and to reveal the accompanying social and pedagogical dynamics.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a contextual study design to gain an in-depth understanding of character education practices within multicultural school environments. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of meanings, experiences, and social processes that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables, particularly in studies of values, interaction, and school culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research sites

were purposively selected from schools with clearly observable multicultural backgrounds, as indicated by the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of their students.

The research participants included principals, teachers, students, and other relevant stakeholders directly involved in the planning and implementation of character education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore the perceptions and experiences of educational actors, participant observation to capture social interactions and pedagogical practices in their natural settings, and document analysis of curricula, school policies, and character education activities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis was conducted thematically through the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns in character education strategies and the dynamics of tolerance value internalization. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking with informants, and researcher reflexivity to minimize interpretive bias.

Result and Discussion
Character Education Strategies as Contextual Pedagogical Practices in Multicultural Schools

The findings indicate that character education in multicultural school contexts cannot be understood as a set of normative values transmitted unidirectionally from teachers to students, but rather as a contextual, relational, and situational pedagogical practice. In school environments that reflect religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, character education is implemented through the integration of tolerance values into everyday learning processes and ongoing social interactions. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of character education is not determined solely by the presence of formal programs, but by how tolerance values are enacted and experienced in students' learning experiences (Sanur & Dermawan, 2023; Maulana et al., 2024).

Teachers play a central role in transforming character education into a meaningful pedagogical practice. Interview results show that teachers do not position themselves as moral authorities who indoctrinate values, but as mediators who facilitate dialogue, reflection, and the negotiation of meaning among students from diverse backgrounds. In classroom situations, teachers actively manage differences of opinion, respond to potentially discriminatory statements, and guide discussions so that differences are understood as normal social realities that must be respected. This mediating role of teachers underscores that character education in multicultural contexts requires pedagogical competencies that go beyond subject matter mastery, including cultural sensitivity and reflective capacity (Manurung et al., 2024; Firmansyah et al., 2025).

Tolerance values in character education practices are not taught explicitly through moral lectures or normative slogans, but are constructed through dialogical and participatory learning experiences. Classroom observations reveal that group discussions, cross-identity collaborative work, and the discussion of contextual social issues serve as primary means through which students interact directly with difference. Through these processes, students do not merely learn about diversity as a concept, but experience it in concrete relationships with their peers. These findings support the view that tolerance is the outcome of repeated and reflective social processes rather than an immediate result of abstract value instruction (Lestari & Sa'adah, 2021; Nasution & Fauzan, 2025).

Furthermore, character education is also embedded within school culture as a social space that shapes a collective normative framework. School rules, institutional symbols, and everyday routines function as implicit mechanisms that reinforce values of mutual respect and inclusivity. Principals and teachers consistently communicate the message that identity differences are an integral part of school life and must be managed fairly and dialogically. This demonstrates that character education takes place not only in classrooms, but also through institutional practices

that shape the overall social climate of the school (Anjarrini & Rindaningsih, 2022; Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that character education strategies are adaptive and contextual rather than uniform across classrooms and situations. Teachers adjust their pedagogical approaches to student characteristics, social dynamics, and emerging issues within school life. While this flexibility enables character education to respond more effectively to difference, it also highlights the limitations of top-down and standardized character education approaches. These findings reinforce critiques of character education policies that emphasize value standardization without adequately considering the complexity of multicultural school contexts (Mashuri, 2021; Tahir et al., 2024).

Contextual character education strategies also require continuous reflection on the part of teachers as educational practitioners. Teachers are expected not only to teach tolerance values, but also to reflect on their own positions, implicit biases, and cultural assumptions brought into pedagogical practice. Interview findings indicate that teachers' reflective awareness contributes to the creation of more inclusive and dialogical learning spaces. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of reflective pedagogy in multicultural education to prevent the reproduction of majority cultural dominance in classrooms (Hakim & Muhid, 2025; Yulianti, 2023). Overall, this subsection demonstrates that character education in multicultural contexts is effective when practiced as a contextual, dialogical, and socially grounded pedagogical process. Tolerance is not understood as a value transmitted normatively, but as a social competence constructed through interaction, reflection, and the management of difference in everyday school life. These findings confirm that character education strategies responsive to multicultural contexts have greater potential to foster sustainable tolerant attitudes than normative and symbolic approaches.

Social Interaction Dynamics and School Culture in the Process of Internalizing Tolerance Values

The findings show that the internalization of tolerance values in multicultural schools does not occur through direct value transmission, but through the dynamics of social interaction that unfold in everyday school life. Interactions among students across religious, ethnic, and cultural identities constitute the primary space in which tolerance is learned, negotiated, and interpreted. In this context, tolerance does not appear as an abstract concept, but as a social practice continuously tested in concrete interpersonal relationships. These findings emphasize that tolerance-based character education is highly dependent on the quality and patterns of social interaction facilitated by the school (Lestari & Sa'adah, 2021; Nasution & Fauzan, 2025). Participant observation indicates that classrooms, group activities, and extracurricular programs serve as the main arenas for the formation of tolerance. Interactions involving cross-background collaboration encourage students to confront differences in values, habits, and perspectives directly. In this process, tolerance does not always emerge harmoniously, but often through friction, misunderstanding, and social negotiation. Yet it is precisely through these dynamics that students learn to manage difference constructively. These findings support the view that tolerance is formed through dynamic social processes rather than through static value indoctrination (Maulana et al., 2024; Firmansyah et al., 2025).

School culture functions as a collective normative framework that shapes these social interactions. School rules, institutional symbols, and everyday routines establish boundaries regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior in relationships among school members. The findings indicate that schools that consistently uphold inclusivity through policy and daily practice tend to create social climates conducive to the internalization of tolerance. In this context, tolerance becomes not merely an individual responsibility of students, but a living social norm within the school community (Anjarrini & Rindaningsih, 2022; Sanur & Dermawan, 2023). The process of internalizing tolerance values is also influenced by power relations and social positioning within the school environment. Interview findings reveal that

students from minority groups often face more complex identity negotiations, particularly when the values they bring from their families are not fully aligned with the dominant school culture. In such situations, the roles of teachers and school policies are crucial in preventing symbolic and social marginalization. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that multicultural education must consciously manage power relations so that tolerance is not reduced to assimilation into the dominant culture (Mashuri, 2021; Hakim & Muhid, 2025).

Social interactions that support tolerance are also strongly influenced by the availability of safe spaces for dialogue. The findings show that when schools provide open discussion forums and fair conflict resolution mechanisms, students are better able to express differences without fear of stigma. Conversely, when differences are avoided or silenced in the name of superficial harmony, prejudice and implicit bias tend to develop latently. These findings reinforce the argument that tolerance cannot grow in repressive climates, but requires structured and pedagogically facilitated spaces for dialogue (Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Yulianti, 2023). The synthesis of social interaction dynamics and school culture in the process of internalizing tolerance values is summarized in Table 1 to illustrate general patterns identified in this study and the related literature.

Table 1. Social and Cultural Dynamics Influencing the Internalization of Tolerance Values in Multicultural Schools

Dimension	Description	Implication for Tolerance Internalization
Student interaction	Daily interaction among students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds	Tolerance develops through direct social experience and negotiation
School culture	Rules, symbols, and routines promoting inclusivity	Provides a collective normative framework supporting tolerance
Teacher mediation	Teacher facilitation of dialogue and conflict resolution	Prevents marginalization and supports reflective understanding
Power relations	Position of minority and majority groups within school	Determines whether tolerance becomes inclusion or forced assimilation
Dialogic spaces	Availability of safe spaces for discussion	Enables constructive engagement with differences

The table underscores that the internalization of tolerance is the result of the interrelationship among social interaction, school culture, and pedagogical practices. No single factor determines the success of tolerance-based character education. Rather, it emerges from a dynamic configuration of multiple social and cultural dimensions. Accordingly, tolerance should be understood as a social competence that develops through collective experience, not merely as an individual attitude that can be measured in isolation. Overall, this subsection demonstrates that the dynamics of social interaction and school culture play a central role in shaping students' tolerance. Character education that neglects interactional and cultural dimensions risks becoming a form of policy symbolism without substantive impact. Conversely, when schools consciously manage social interactions, institutional culture, and power relations in an inclusive manner, tolerance values are more likely to be internalized deeply and sustainably among students.

Structural Challenges and Critical Reflections on the Implementation of Multicultural Character Education

The findings indicate that the implementation of character education in multicultural school contexts is inseparable from various structural challenges that influence the effectiveness of strengthening tolerance values. These challenges do not originate solely from individual students, but also from the relationships among schools, families, educational policies, and broader social structures. Therefore, character education cannot be understood as a neutral

pedagogical process, but rather as a social practice operating within a complex field of interests, values, and power relations. One of the main challenges identified is the divergence between family values and school values. Interview findings reveal that some students bring values, beliefs, and prejudices that have been strongly internalized within their family and community environments. When these values are not aligned with the principles of tolerance promoted at school, latent resistance to character education practices may emerge. In such situations, schools face a difficult position, as efforts to strengthen tolerance may be perceived as interventions into family values. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that multicultural education often encounters social boundaries that cannot be fully controlled by educational institutions (Lestari & Sa'adah, 2021; Mashuri, 2021).

Another structural challenge relates to the presence of implicit bias in pedagogical practices. Although teachers normatively support tolerance values, observational data show that cultural biases and normative assumptions may still emerge unconsciously in classroom interactions. These biases are reflected in the selection of learning examples, responses to students' opinions, and expectations toward certain groups. This condition indicates that multicultural character education requires more than normative commitment, and demands continuous critical reflection on teachers' positions and pedagogical practices (Hakim & Muhid, 2025; Yulianti, 2023). Limitations in teachers' capacity also constitute a significant challenge in the implementation of multicultural character education. The findings show that not all teachers possess adequate multicultural pedagogical foundations to manage diversity in a reflective and dialogical manner. Some teachers continue to interpret character education as the uniform transmission of universal values, without considering the complexity of students' identities and social experiences. This condition reinforces previous research findings that the success of character education is highly dependent on teachers' pedagogical competence in understanding the social and cultural context of schools (Manurung et al., 2024; Firmansyah et al., 2025).

In addition, structural challenges also arise from top-down and symbolic character education policies. Document analysis indicates that character education policies are often formulated in normative and general terms, without providing contextual implementation guidelines. As a result, schools and teachers are required to interpret these policies independently, with levels of success that depend heavily on institutional capacity and the agency of local educational actors. These findings strengthen critiques of character education approaches that prioritize administrative compliance rather than the transformation of pedagogical practice (Sanur & Dermawan, 2023; Tahir et al., 2024). In addressing these challenges, the findings show that effective character education strategies are adaptive and reflective rather than uniform. Schools that are able to manage diversity constructively tend to develop flexible, contextual, and dialogue-based character education approaches. Teachers and school leaders actively reflect on ongoing practices, adjust strategies to students' social dynamics, and open spaces for internal evaluation of existing biases and limitations. This reflective approach allows character education to function as a living process of social learning rather than merely as the implementation of formal policy (Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Nasution & Fauzan, 2025).

Critical reflection on the implementation of multicultural character education also highlights the importance of positioning tolerance as a social competence that develops gradually. Tolerance cannot be imposed through rules or moral slogans, but must be constructed through sustained social experiences that are pedagogically managed. When character education is reduced to policy symbolism or institutional ritual, tolerance values risk losing their substantive meaning and failing to be internalized in students' behavior. These findings emphasize that multicultural character education must be carried out with critical awareness of social context, power relations, and identity dynamics within schools (Maulana et al., 2024; Arfaton et al., 2025). Overall, this subsection demonstrates that structural challenges in the implementation of multicultural character education are unavoidable, but can be managed

through reflective, adaptive, and dialogical pedagogical approaches. Character education oriented toward tolerance will lose its transformative potential if detached from critical analysis of the school's social context. Conversely, when schools consciously address these structural challenges, character education has the potential to become a key instrument in building inclusive school cultures and strengthening tolerance across identities in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, it can be concluded that character education in multicultural school contexts is effective when practiced as a contextual, dialogical, and socially grounded pedagogical process, rather than merely as a normative program or symbolic policy. The discussion shows that the strengthening of tolerance values does not occur through direct value transmission, but through the integration of values into everyday learning, the role of teachers as value mediators, and the dynamics of cross-identity social interaction within the school environment. Tolerance is formed as a social competence that develops through experience, dialogue, and the negotiation of meaning in concrete relationships among students, supported by an inclusive and reflective school culture.

This study also confirms that the internalization of tolerance values is strongly influenced by the social and structural context of schools. Interactions among students, institutional culture, power relations between majority and minority groups, and the availability of safe spaces for dialogue are key determinants of the success of multicultural character education. However, the implementation of character education is inseparable from various structural challenges, including value differences between families and schools, implicit bias in pedagogical practice, limitations in teachers' capacity, and top-down character education policies that lack contextual sensitivity. Without critical reflection on these challenges, character education risks being trapped in policy symbolism that does not produce substantive impacts on students' behavior and tolerant attitudes.

Based on these findings, this study contributes theoretically to the field of character education by situating it within a framework of contextual multiculturalism and school social practice. Character education should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by interaction, culture, and power relations, rather than as a uniform instrument for value inculcation. Practically, schools and educational stakeholders are encouraged to strengthen teachers' multicultural competence through reflective pedagogical training and cultural sensitivity development, as well as to design school policies that support dialogue, inclusivity, and fair management of diversity. For future research, comparative studies across different school contexts and regions are recommended, along with longitudinal research capable of capturing the long-term dynamics of character education in shaping tolerance and social cohesion in multicultural societies.

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Conflict Of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflict of interest in the preparation of this work.

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