Multicultural Learning Strategy to Enhance Cultural Understanding in Early Childhood at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo Deli Serdang

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Abstract

This study aims to develop and analyze multicultural learning strategies that can improve cultural understanding in early childhood at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang. In the context of increasing globalization, understanding cultural diversity is very important for fostering tolerance and mutual respect from an early age. Through an approach based on multicultural values, this study will identify effective learning models for introducing children to cultural diversity in their surroundings. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method involving teachers at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang as research subjects. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The focus of this study is to design learning strategies that are appropriate for the characteristics of early childhood and apply them in learning activities that are interesting and easy to understand. By introducing various elements of local and international culture, it is hoped that children will be more sensitive to diversity and understand and appreciate the differences that exist in society. The results of the study show that the application of multicultural learning strategies at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo is very effective in increasing cultural understanding in early childhood. Through a story-based approach, songs, traditional games, and art activities, children can learn about various cultures in a fun way. Teachers also actively encourage children to discuss the cultural diversity around them, both through personal experiences and stories from parents or the community. The discussion reveals that the use of visual and interactive media greatly helps children understand the concept of cultural diversity. For example, through pictures and videos about daily life in various regions, children can see firsthand the differences in lifestyles that exist in society. In addition, experience-based learning, such as visiting cultural sites or inviting speakers from various backgrounds, also increases children's awareness of the importance of tolerance. Overall, this study shows that multicultural learning integrated into the early childhood education curriculum can foster mutual respect and strengthen understanding of diversity from an early age. It is hoped that the results of this study can be used as a reference for other educational institutions

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in designing and implementing learning programs that support the growth of tolerance and appreciation for cultural differences.

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Introduction

The rapid development of the times has made the world increasingly connected, leading to more complex social and cultural interactions. Indonesia, with its diversity of ethnicities, religions, races, and cultures, is a place rich in social dynamics. This diversity presents its own challenges in shaping a generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also capable of understanding and appreciating cultural differences. Multicultural education for early childhood in Indonesia is a strategic issue in building a generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also has a strong character in facing the challenges of cultural diversity. As a country with more than 700 ethnic groups and 700 regional languages, Indonesia faces social complexities that require an inclusive educational approach that is sensitive to cultural differences (Aidar Idrus et al., 2024). This diversity, although a rich cultural asset, also has the potential to cause conflict and social tension if not managed properly in the education system (Sari & Nugroho, 2021).

Indonesia, as a country with ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, faces challenges in maintaining social harmony. Social conflicts related to differences in ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA) often arise due to a lack of understanding and appreciation of diversity. Therefore, multicultural education is important to be implemented in PIAUD as a preventive measure in instilling values of tolerance and mutual respect from an early age.

Multicultural education in early childhood focuses not only on introducing different cultures, but also on internalizing values such as tolerance, empathy, and justice. According to Dista, Mandira, and Dilla (2025), the transformation of multicultural education can be achieved through three levels: the individual, the school, and society. At the individual level, children are introduced to basic values such as mutual respect and fairness. At the school level, the curriculum and learning programs are designed to reflect cultural diversity. Meanwhile, at the community level, the involvement of parents and the community in the learning process is important to enrich children's experiences.

At the level of Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD), this period is a golden age in shaping children's character. Values such as tolerance, empathy, and appreciation for diversity can be instilled early on through multicultural-based learning strategies. However, the implementation of multicultural education in PIAUD still faces various challenges, such as a lack of understanding among teachers about the concept of multiculturalism and limited resources in developing a curriculum that encompasses cultural diversity (Hasanah & Uswatun, 2018).

Early childhood education is a very important foundation in shaping children's character. At this age, children begin to learn about the world around them, forming views about themselves, others, and their environment. Therefore, it is very important to introduce multicultural values from an early age so that children can understand, accept, and celebrate diversity. Multicultural education is one approach that can help children understand cultural diversity and develop attitudes of tolerance and appreciation for differences (Nieto, 2020).

Early childhood Islamic education (PIAUD) plays a crucial role in shaping children's character and identity. At this stage of development, children begin to recognize and understand the world around them, including social and cultural values. Introduction to cultural diversity from an early age can foster tolerance, empathy, and appreciation for differences, which are important foundations for social life.

The implementation of multicultural education in PIAUD also requires the active role of teachers. Teachers, as facilitators and role models for children, must have a good understanding of cultural diversity and be able to integrate multicultural values into every aspect of learning. According to Pitaloka, Dimyati, and Purwanta (2021), the role of teachers in instilling values of tolerance in early childhood is very important, because teachers can influence children's attitudes and behaviors towards differences.

In this context, RA Al Ikhlas Kongo in Deli Serdang became the focus of this study because this school has a rich cultural diversity background. However, the learning process that takes place in this school is still conventional and has not fully integrated the concept of multiculturalism into every teaching and learning activity. In fact, exposure to diverse cultures can develop children's empathy and tolerance towards the differences around them. Previous studies have shown that learning strategies that involve various cultures can increase understanding and positive attitudes towards diversity (Banks, 2020).

The importance of multicultural learning in early childhood education is gaining attention as social issues related to intolerance, discrimination, and social tensions between groups develop. If not addressed early on, these issues can worsen relationships between individuals and groups in the future. Therefore, a learning approach that promotes understanding and appreciation of other cultures is essential, especially at the elementary level as implemented at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo. This study aims to design and develop multicultural learning strategies that can be applied in the school to enhance cultural understanding and tolerance among early childhood. Thus, the application of multicultural learning strategies in PIAUD at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang, is a strategic step to improve cultural understanding in early childhood. Through a contextual approach based on local values, it is hoped that children can grow into individuals who appreciate diversity and are able to contribute to creating a harmonious and inclusive society.

Literature Review
2.1 Strategy

A strategy is a plan or approach designed to achieve specific goals through a series of organized actions or policies. In the context of education, strategy refers to the methods or means used to achieve desired outcomes in the learning process. According to Porter (1996), strategy is a pattern or plan of action designed to create competitive advantage in the face of challenges in a changing environment. In education, learning strategies refer to the approaches used by educators to achieve effective and efficient learning objectives, taking into account various factors such as student characteristics, learning objectives, and environmental conditions.

For example, in multicultural education, learning strategies include the use of various methods and techniques designed to introduce and integrate cultural diversity values to students. This includes selecting relevant materials, using appropriate learning media, and applying methods that can raise awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. According to Banks (2016), multicultural learning strategies aim to facilitate learning that values differences, enhances intercultural understanding, and creates an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

According to Thompson and Strickland (2020), strategy is a series of coordinated and targeted actions to achieve desired long-term goals. They emphasize that in formulating a strategy, it is important to consider external and internal factors that influence the achievement of goals. In the context of education, this means considering student needs, challenges in teaching, and changes in the social and cultural environment that can affect learning.

On the other hand, in early childhood education, learning strategies refer to the methods used to create an environment that supports children's holistic development, both cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically. According to Supriatna and Setiawan (2020), effective learning strategies in early childhood education are those that can accommodate the diversity of children's characteristics and support them in understanding and appreciating diversity, both within and outside the school environment.

As the educational paradigm evolves to focus more on inclusive and multicultural values, learning strategies must embrace socio-cultural diversity and encourage children to become individuals who are not only intelligent but also tolerant and respectful of differences.

According to Widyawati (2021), learning strategies are the formulation of possible variations in the meaning and types of general teaching sequences. In the COVID-19 pandemic situation, learning strategies must be adapted to existing conditions, such as online learning through applications such as WhatsApp and Zoom, as well as offline learning by visiting children's homes to ensure that learning materials can still be delivered effectively.

Furthermore, Idrus et al. (2024) identified four main strategies in the development of multicultural education in Indonesia, namely:
a. Curriculum Revision. Incorporating multicultural content into the education curriculum to reflect existing cultural diversity.
b. Improving Teacher Competence. Through training and education, teachers are equipped with an understanding and skills in teaching multicultural values.
c. Inclusive School Environment. Creating a school atmosphere that respects differences and supports diversity.
d. Community and Family Involvement. Encouraging parents and the community to actively participate in the implementation of multicultural education.

Thus, strategies in early childhood education are not merely teaching methods or techniques, but also include comprehensive planning that involves the curriculum, educator competencies, the learning environment, and the involvement of parents and the community. This approach aims to create a holistic and inclusive learning experience for children, preparing them to understand and appreciate cultural diversity from an early age.

2.2 Multicultural Learning

Multicultural learning can be defined as an approach in education that aims to introduce, appreciate, and celebrate cultural diversity within society. This learning not only emphasizes understanding cultural differences, but also developing attitudes of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance of diversity in ethnicity, religion, race, and other social backgrounds. Multicultural learning involves the process of internalizing universal values that promote justice, peace, and unity in diversity (Arifin & Rakhmat, 2020).

According to Arifin and Rakhmat (2020), multicultural learning can be implemented by integrating various cultural elements that exist in society into relevant and contextual learning

materials. This process involves an in-depth approach, such as integrating diversity values into the curriculum, utilizing local media, and involving parents and the community in supporting inclusive and equitable education. This approach is very important in shaping a generation that is not only academically intelligent but also has a high social awareness of the cultural diversity around them.

Multicultural learning refers to an educational approach that integrates cultural diversity values into the learning process, both in the curriculum and in social interactions in the classroom. The main objective of multicultural learning is to foster mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding of cultural differences among individuals. In the context of early childhood education, this approach plays an important role in shaping children's characters so that they can accept and appreciate diversity, which will ultimately strengthen social cohesion in the future.

According to Banks (2020), multicultural learning encompasses four main components, namely: (1) developing cultural awareness, (2) introducing the history and contributions of various cultural groups, (3) applying the values of democracy and social justice, and (4) providing equal opportunities for all students regardless of their cultural background. Through this approach, students are encouraged to understand diversity in various aspects of life, whether in social, political, economic, or cultural contexts, and learn how to interact with individuals from different backgrounds.

Furthermore, Nieto (2020) states that multicultural education is not only about introducing children to different cultures, but also building positive attitudes towards these differences. This process involves developing a deep understanding of racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, as well as how these differences affect individual experiences in society. Multicultural learning is expected to not only teach cognitive knowledge, but also shape attitudes and behaviors that support peace, solidarity, and inclusivity in a pluralistic society.

The importance of multicultural learning, especially in early childhood Islamic education (PIAUD), is strongly emphasized, because at this stage children begin to form their perceptions of the world around them, including differences that exist. Multicultural learning is expected to build a foundation for children's character that is tolerant, appreciative of differences, and open to diversity, which will have a positive impact on their social life. Therefore, this learning needs to be applied systematically and structurally in the PIAUD curriculum.

2.3 Cultural Understanding

Cultural understanding refers to the cognitive process that enables individuals to recognize, understand, and appreciate the values, norms, practices, and traditions that exist within a group or society. This process involves the ability to recognize cultural differences, understand social contexts, and respect the perspectives and cultural identities of others. Cultural understanding is not only about knowing the customs or traditions of a group, but also about accepting differences as part of the diversity that exists in society (Hofstede, 2020).

According to Adler and Gundersen (2020), cultural understanding involves two main dimensions: cognitive and affective. The cognitive dimension focuses on knowledge and understanding of other cultures, including information about the customs, language, and history of a group. The affective dimension, on the other hand, relates to the attitudes and emotions that individuals have towards different cultures. A good understanding of culture will help

individuals to interact more effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds and create more harmonious relationships in a multicultural society.

Cultural understanding is very important in social life, especially in the context of globalization, which brings communities into more frequent cross-cultural interactions. One approach to building cultural understanding is through multicultural education, which aims to introduce different cultures in a positive way. This not only helps to increase cognitive knowledge about cultural differences, but also develops attitudes and values that support tolerance and appreciation of diversity. (Putra, 2020) In addition, cultural understanding is also related to an individual's ability to put themselves in other people's perspectives and appreciate these differences, whether in a social, religious, or ethnic context. In an increasingly connected and pluralistic society, having a good understanding of culture can improve the quality of social interactions and strengthen mutual respect between individuals and different social groups (Rini, 2020). Therefore, cultural understanding is not merely knowledge about other cultures, but also social and emotional skills that enable a person to adapt, collaborate, and coexist with others from different cultural backgrounds.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to develop and analyze multicultural learning strategies that can improve cultural understanding in early childhood at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study is to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of the research subjects regarding the application of multicultural learning strategies in early childhood education settings. Through this approach, it is hoped that a deeper understanding can be gained of how teachers and children interact with learning materials and how these learning strategies influence children's cultural understanding.

3.1 Research Subjects

The subjects in this study were teachers who taught at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang. The teachers were selected because they played an important role in implementing and developing multicultural learning strategies in the classroom. In addition, young children at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo were also involved in this study as indirect respondents, who contributed to identifying the effectiveness of the learning strategies implemented.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study was collected through three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies.

1. **In-depth Interviews**.

   Interviews were conducted with teachers involved in teaching at RA Al Ikhlas Congo. These in-depth interviews aimed to explore teachers' views, experiences, and understanding of the implementation of multicultural learning. The interview questions were designed to identify the strategies they used to introduce culture to children and the obstacles they faced during the learning process. In addition, the interviews also aimed to determine the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of multicultural learning in improving children's cultural understanding.

2. **Observation**

The researcher conducted direct observations of learning activities at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo. These observations were carried out to monitor the implementation of multicultural learning strategies applied by teachers. The researcher observed how cultural material was introduced to children through various activities such as games, arts, and stories, as well as how interactions between teachers and children took place. The observation data helped provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of the strategies used in daily learning.

3. **Documentation Study**

Documentation studies are conducted by collecting various relevant documents, such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and notes and reports on learning activities that have been carried out. This documentation provides an overview of the planning and implementation of multicultural learning and can be used to analyze the suitability between the expected learning theory and the practices that occur in the field.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from interviews, observations, and documentation studies were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process began with transcribing interviews and observation notes, which were then coded to identify the main themes that emerged. These themes related to aspects of the multicultural learning strategies implemented, the challenges faced, and their impact on children's cultural understanding. After the main themes were identified, the researchers conducted further analysis to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and recommendations for the development of multicultural learning at RA Al Ikhlas Congo.

Results

This study aims to develop and analyze multicultural learning strategies that can improve cultural understanding in early childhood at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang. Based on the results obtained through in-depth interviews with teachers, direct observation of learning activities, and documentation studies related to the implementation of learning strategies, this study identified several important findings related to the effectiveness of multicultural learning strategies in introducing cultural diversity to children.

4.1 Implementation of Multicultural Learning Strategies

The implementation of multicultural learning strategies at RA Al Ikhlas Congo is carried out by utilizing various approaches that integrate the values of cultural diversity. Based on observations, activities designed to introduce cultural diversity to children include art activities, stories, traditional games, and visual media such as pictures and videos that showcase various local and international cultures. These activities are designed to attract children's attention and be easily understood according to their cognitive development level.

One of the most effective methods of introducing culture is through stories that describe the daily lives of people from different cultural backgrounds. This is in line with Banks' (2004) idea that a story-based approach can enhance multicultural understanding because stories allow children to experience and understand cultural differences through narrative experiences that are close to their lives. In this case, teachers at RA Al Ikhlas Congo integrate local stories that

contain cultural values, such as folk tales from various tribes in Indonesia, as well as international stories to introduce children to the diversity of world cultures.

4.2 The Role of Teachers in Developing Multicultural Understanding

Teachers play a very important role in the implementation of multicultural learning strategies. Interviews with teachers show that they not only act as conveyors of material, but also as facilitators who guide children to understand and appreciate cultural differences. Teachers at RA Al Ikhlas Congo utilize participatory methods that involve children in various interactive activities , such as discussing diversity and conducting activities that involve culture, such as making handicrafts from various regions.

According to Gay (2010), teachers who have a good understanding of multiculturalism can create an inclusive learning environment that helps children develop mutual respect. This is reflected in the practices carried out by teachers at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, where they not only teach material about culture, but also encourage children to actively participate in activities that celebrate diversity, such as traditional dance competitions or making traditional foods from various regions.

4.3 The Influence of Multicultural Learning on Children's Cultural Understanding

One of the main findings of this study is that the implementation of multicultural learning strategies has a positive impact on children's cultural understanding at RA Al Ikhlas Congo. Based on the results of observations, children showed great interest in material related to diverse cultures. They found it easier to understand and appreciate cultural differences after participating in various activities that showcased cultural diversity. The children not only learned about their own culture, but also began to show greater curiosity about other cultures.

Understanding cultural diversity from an early age has a significant influence on the development of tolerance and mutual respect. In line with McAllister's (2005) thinking, multicultural education can help children understand that cultural diversity is normal and should be appreciated. In this context, learning activities that integrate local and international cultures play an important role in shaping inclusive attitudes in children.

4.4 Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Learning

Although the implementation of multicultural learning strategies at RA Al Ikhlas Congo has yielded positive results, this study also found several challenges faced by teachers. One of the main challenges is limited resources, especially in terms of learning materials that can comprehensively cover various cultures. Some teachers revealed that it is sometimes difficult to find relevant materials that are appropriate for the children's age and can accurately describe cultural diversity.

This is in line with Nieto's (2010) opinion, which states that one of the main obstacles in multicultural education is the limited teaching materials that can reflect cultural diversity fairly and accurately. Therefore, teachers at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo strive to overcome this challenge by exploring local materials and using various creative media to introduce culture to children.

4.5 Recommendations for the Development of Multicultural Learning

Based on the results of this study, there are several recommendations for further development in multicultural learning at RA Al Ikhlas Congo. First, it is important for schools to continue developing teaching materials that cover various cultures, both local and international, taking into account cultural diversity in Indonesia and the world. Second, teachers need to be given further training on multicultural teaching to improve their understanding in designing more effective learning strategies. Finally, the school can expand its cooperation with local and international communities to create a more diverse learning experience for children.

Conclusion

The implementation of multicultural learning strategies at RA Al Ikhlas Kongo, Deli Serdang, has proven effective in improving cultural understanding among early childhood students. Activities that integrate stories, art, games, and visual media have successfully attracted children's interest and helped them understand cultural diversity more deeply. The role of teachers as facilitators in this learning process is very important, and challenges faced, such as limited teaching materials, can be overcome with creativity and collaboration. Multicultural learning is expected to continue to be developed to shape a generation that is more tolerant and respectful of differences.

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