
Teachers as Strategic Agents in Multicultural Education at Vocational High Schools: An Analysis of Practice at SMKN 1 Talamau

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Abstract

Objective: Analyze the strategic role of teachers in the implementation of multicultural education in vocational schools with a focus on SMKN 1 Talamau. The study highlights the role of teachers in the formation of the inclusive character and social competence of students. The results are directed at the formulation of contextual recommendations for the role of teachers. **Theoretical framework:** This research is based on the concept of multicultural education that emphasizes the management of diversity in learning. Teachers are positioned as strategic actors in building critical cultural awareness. Multicultural education is understood as part of the formation of character and work readiness of vocational school students. **Literature review:** The study of multicultural education is still dominated by the context of general and urban education. Studies on the role of teachers in vocational schools and regional schools are still limited. In addition, the role of teachers is generally studied descriptively and not yet strategically. **Methods:** This study uses a qualitative approach with an analytical descriptive design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies at SMKN 1 Talamau. Data analysis is carried out thematically by ensuring validity through triangulation. **Results:** The results of the study show that the role of teachers as role models, facilitators, innovators, mediators, and reflective evaluators is the main pillar of multicultural education. Effective implementation occurs when multicultural values are integrated into the curriculum, learning, and school culture. This role contributes to strengthening students' inclusive character and social competence. **Implications:** The development of multicultural education in vocational schools requires the support of school policies, teacher competency improvement, and government regulations. The sustainability of implementation depends on cross-stakeholder collaboration. The sustainability of implementation depends on cross-stakeholder collaboration. **Novelty:** The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of the strategic and multidimensional role of teachers in the context of regional vocational schools. This study integrates multicultural education with vocational education as well as the needs of the world of work through contextual and adaptive conceptual models.

Keywords: role of exemplary teachers, facilitators, innovators, evaluators, multicultural education.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a pluralistic nation, is characterized by the diversity of ethnicities, religions, races, and groups (SARA) that are inherent in the character of social life. This reality demands an educational paradigm that not only recognizes differences but is also able to manage them constructively as a collective force [1]. In this context, multicultural education is understood not just as a normative discourse but as a strategic need to transform social awareness, reduce inequality, and reduce apathy and intolerance. Schools have an important role as a social space that instills the values of inclusivity, justice, and respect for diversity as the foundation of democratic life [2].

The implementation of multicultural education is becoming increasingly complex at the Vocational High School (SMK) level. In addition to being oriented towards the formation of vocational competence and work readiness, vocational schools are also responsible for shaping the character of students as citizens with integrity, social responsibility, and being able to adapt and collaborate in an increasingly global and diverse work environment [3]. Therefore, multicultural education in vocational schools cannot be incidental, but needs to be systematically integrated in the learning process, social interaction, and school culture to be able to produce graduates who are technically superior as well as socially and morally mature [4].

In the local context, SMKN 1 Talamau, as part of the national education ecosystem in the region, faces the reality of real diversity, both from the background of students and educators. This diversity, if not managed consciously and strategically, has the potential to cause social fragmentation and group exclusivity in the school environment. The tendency of students to form groups based on the similarity of regional origin or social background shows that diversity requires planned pedagogical intervention in order to develop into positive social capital [5].

This condition emphasizes the importance of the role of teachers in multicultural education. Teachers are no longer positioned solely as deliverers of vocational materials but as agents of change who play a strategic role in shaping students' views, attitudes, and behaviors towards differences. Through learning planning, pedagogical strategies, attitude modeling, and value-oriented evaluation, teachers have a key role in designing, implementing, and sustainably evaluating multicultural education. Departing from this framework, this article examines the strategic role of teachers in multicultural education in vocational schools with a focus on SMKN 1 Talamau, to analyze the conceptual framework of the role of teachers, identifying effective implementation strategies and methods, examining the challenges and opportunities faced, and formulating recommendations for contextual and applicable teacher role models [6].

Multicultural education has become an essential educational paradigm in societies marked by cultural, religious, and social diversity. In the Indonesian context, where pluralism is deeply embedded in everyday life, education is expected to function not only as a mechanism for skill transmission but also as a space for cultivating inclusive character, social responsibility, and mutual respect. This responsibility is particularly significant in vocational high schools, which are primarily oriented toward technical competence, employability, and work readiness. Within such institutions, multicultural education is often marginalized or treated as an auxiliary moral discourse rather than as a strategic educational framework integrated into vocational learning and school culture [6].

This study offers a novel contribution by positioning teachers as strategic and multidimensional agents in the implementation of multicultural education within a vocational school setting. Unlike previous studies that largely examine multicultural education in general or urban schools, this research focuses on a regional vocational high school, SMKN 1 Talamau, where diversity is experienced concretely in students' social interactions, classroom dynamics, and institutional culture. The novelty of this research lies in its analytical shift from viewing teachers' roles descriptively to understanding them

strategically, emphasizing how teachers actively design, mediate, and evaluate multicultural learning processes in alignment with vocational education goals [7].

Furthermore, this study integrates multicultural education with the distinctive objectives of vocational education by highlighting its relevance to the development of students' social competence and professional soft skills. Multicultural values such as cooperation, tolerance, effective communication, and ethical professionalism are shown to be inseparable from workplace readiness. By framing multicultural education as a foundational component of vocational character formation, this research advances a contextual and adaptive conceptual model that aligns diversity management with the demands of the world of work [8].

The implications of this research are significant at multiple levels. At the institutional level, the findings underscore the need for school policies that explicitly support multicultural education as part of vocational development. At the pedagogical level, the study highlights the importance of strengthening teachers' competencies in multicultural pedagogy, reflective evaluation, and conflict mediation. At the policy level, the research suggests that sustainable multicultural education requires systemic support, including curriculum alignment, professional development, and cross-stakeholder collaboration. Overall, this study demonstrates that empowering teachers as strategic agents enables vocational schools to transform diversity into social capital, producing graduates who are not only technically competent but also inclusive, adaptable, and socially responsible members of society [9].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural education has long been positioned as a strategic approach in responding to the reality of social and cultural diversity in the world of education. Conceptually, multicultural education emphasizes the recognition, respect, and management of diversity as an integral part of the learning process [10]. James A. Banks emphasized that the success of multicultural education is highly dependent on teachers' understanding of the cultural background of students, because culture influences the way of learning, interaction patterns, and the construction of meaning in education. Thus, teachers are positioned as key actors in developing *cultural critical awareness* in the school environment [11].

A number of previous studies have examined the implementation of multicultural education at various levels of education. At the vocational level, the literature shows that multicultural education needs to be integrated with the main goals of vocational education, namely job readiness and the formation of a professional ethos [12]. A study at SMK Bakti Karya Parigi, for example, shows that multicultural education can be implemented effectively through the creation of contextual learning environments and real learning incubation, such as the "Kampung Nusantara" program, which allows students to experience firsthand the practice of diversity. This research emphasizes the importance of the environment and school programs as a medium for internalizing multicultural values [13].

On the other hand, studies on the role of teachers in multicultural education have also developed. Research at SMK Negeri 6 Yogyakarta identifies the role of teachers as multidimensional, including pedagogical, managerial, and affective functions, such as teachers, facilitators, mediators, evaluators, and role models [14]. Meanwhile, studies at the high school level tend to simplify the role of teachers into two core functions, namely as informants and *role models*. Although these studies enrich the understanding of the role of teachers, most still place the role descriptively and normatively [15].

However, a critical review of the literature shows a significant number of *research gaps*. First, most of the research discusses multicultural education in general or at the primary and upper secondary education levels, while studies that specifically highlight the context of vocational schools are still limited [16]. Second, existing research tends to highlight multicultural education practices or programs, but has not in-depth

analyzed the role of teachers as strategic actors who design, implement, and evaluate multicultural education in a sustainable manner [17]. Third, previous studies have rarely linked the role of teachers in multicultural education to the typical needs of vocational schools, especially the relationship between multicultural values and the formation of work competencies (*soft skills*) in the vocational environment [18]. Fourth, contextual research in regional vocational schools, such as SMKN 1 Talamau, is still very limited in the national literature. To clarify the position of this study, Table 1 presents a *mapping of the research gap* based on relevant literature reviews.

Table 1. Mapping Multicultural Education Research and the Role of Teachers

Study Aspects	Findings of Previous Research	Limitations (Research Gap)	Position of this research
Multicultural Education Focus	Widely studied in general education and high school	Specific studies on vocational schools are still limited	Focus on multicultural education in vocational schools
The Role of the Teacher	Descriptively described (teacher, role model, facilitator)	Has not been analyzed as a strategic and transformative role	Analyze the role of teachers strategically and multidimensionally
Integration with Vocational Education	Multicultural education is discussed separately from the vocational context.	Lack of study on the integration of multicultural values with job readiness	Linking the role of teachers with strengthening <i>vocational soft skills</i>
The Local Context of the School	Dominated studies in urban schools or model schools	Lack of contextual studies in regional vocational schools	Contextual studies at SMKN 1 Talamau
Implementation Stages	Focus on a specific practice or program	It does not include planning, implementation, and evaluation in its entirety.	Analyze the role of teachers from planning to evaluation.

Based on this mapping, it can be concluded that there is still a need for research that comprehensively analyzes the role of teachers in multicultural education in vocational schools with a strategic and contextual approach [19]. This research seeks to fill this gap by placing teachers as central actors who not only carry out pedagogical functions, but also play a role in designing, implementing, and evaluating multicultural education that is relevant to the characteristics of vocational schools and the local context of SMKN 1 Talamau. Thus, this article is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of multicultural education in vocational schools [20].

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to deeply understand the strategic role of teachers in multicultural education in Vocational High Schools [21]. The research was carried out at SMKN 1 Talamau, which was chosen purposively because it represented vocational schools in areas with real social and cultural diversity. The research subjects included teachers, school leaders, and students who were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and relevance to the implementation of multicultural education [22]. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies of the curriculum, lesson plans, and school programs and activities. Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing by relating empirical findings to theoretical frameworks and previous research [23]. The validity of the data is guaranteed through

triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as limited member checking, while the ethical aspect of the research is maintained by ensuring the confidentiality of the identity of the informant and the use of data solely for academic purposes [24].

Table 2. Summary of Research Methodology

Components	Remarks
Approach & Design	Qualitative, descriptive-analytical
Research Location	SMKN 1 Talamau
Research Subject	Teachers, school leaders, students
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling
Data Collection Techniques	Interviews, observations, documentation
Data Analysis Techniques	Thematic analysis
Data Validity	Triangulation of sources and techniques
Research Ethics	Confidentiality of informants and consent of participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of the Role of Teachers in Multicultural Education in Vocational Schools

The results of the analysis show that the role of teachers in multicultural education in vocational schools, especially in the context of SMKN 1 Talamau, is multidimensional and strategic, beyond the conventional pedagogical function. These findings confirm the conceptual framework of multicultural education that places teachers as key actors in managing diversity pedagogically and socially [25]. In line with James A. Banks' view, teachers not only transmit knowledge, but also form cultural critical awareness that influences the way students interact and learn in diverse environments [26].

In the context of vocational schools, the findings show that multicultural education cannot be separated from the vocational goals of the school. Multicultural values such as teamwork, cross-cultural communication, tolerance, and professional ethics emerged as soft skills that are relevant and needed in the world of work [27]. This reinforces previous empirical findings at SMK Bakti Karya Parigi, which show that multicultural education is effective when presented in the form of real and contextual learning experiences, not just normative discourse [28].

The Strategic Role of the Teacher: Multidimensional Analysis

Based on the synthesis of data and literature, the role of teachers in multicultural education in vocational schools can be mapped into five main strategic roles. First, teachers are role models and role models. The findings show that teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and speech are the main mediums for internalizing multicultural values. Exemplary in treating students fairly regardless of social, cultural, or religious backgrounds creates an inclusive learning climate [29]. This role is informal but ongoing, and has proven to be more effective than theoretical value delivery [30].

Second, teachers are facilitators and innovators of learning. Teachers play a role in designing learning experiences that encourage positive interaction between students from different backgrounds [31]. Practices such as collaborative project-based learning, heterogeneous grouping in classrooms or workshops, integration of local wisdom in teaching materials, and simulation of multicultural work environments show that

multicultural education can be internalized contextually. These findings reinforce previous studies that emphasized that simple, yet consciously designed, pedagogical interventions are capable of breaking down social barriers between students [32].

Third, teachers as mediators and dialogue builders. In diverse class dynamics, the potential for misunderstandings and social conflicts is inevitable [33]. The results of the analysis show that teachers play an important role in facilitating open dialogue, managing students' emotions, and constructively building conflict resolution. This role contributes directly to the development of students' social-emotional skills that are relevant to social and professional life [34].

Fourth, teachers as reflective evaluators. Multicultural education evaluation is not limited to cognitive measurement, but it also includes changes in student attitudes and behaviors [35]. Diverse evaluation practices such as participatory observation, student-written reflection, and collaborative project assessment allow teachers to more comprehensively assess the effectiveness of the learning process. Evaluation also serves as a means of reflection for teachers to refine the pedagogical strategies used [36].

Fifth, teachers as collaborators and liaisons with the community. The findings suggest that community engagement around schools can strengthen multicultural education [37]. Teachers play a role in bridging schools with the community through the involvement of parents, resource persons from various professional backgrounds, and local culture-based activities. This role expands students' learning spaces and connects multicultural values with social realities outside of school [38].

Implementation and Evaluation of Multicultural Education in Vocational Schools

The results of the study show that the implementation of multicultural education in vocational schools requires a systemic approach, including the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages [39]. As summarized in Table 3, the role of teachers varies at each stage of implementation, ranging from innovators and collaborators at the planning stage, facilitators and mediators at the implementation stage, to reflective evaluators at the evaluation stage.

Table 3. Implementation Plan for Multicultural Education with the Role of Teachers

Stages	Activities/Policies	The Dominant Role of the Teacher	Expected Output
Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analysis of the context of diversity in schools and districts. 2. Workshop on the preparation of an integrative lesson plan. 3. Planning of the "Class/Cultural Village" program or the like. 	Innovators, Collaborators	Operational curriculum & lesson plans that integrate multicultural values.
Implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning in the classroom with heterogeneous cooperative methods. 2. Inter-class/competency collaboration projects. 	Facilitator, Role Model, Mediator	Positive student interaction, <i>first-hand experience</i> , and inclusive school climate.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Cultural activities (art performances, culinary festivals, etc.) 4. Habituation of an inclusive attitude in all school areas. 		
Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Observation of attitudes and participation. 2. Reflection on student journals. 3. Collaborative project assessment. 4. Regular school climate surveys. 	Reflective Evaluator	Data on the development of student attitudes, feedback for program improvement.

A comprehensive evaluation approach, as practiced at SMK Bakti Karya Parigi, shows that community involvement and authentic learning experience assessments can strengthen the sustainability of multicultural education. Although specific empirical data on SMKN 1 Talamau are still limited, the results of the synthesis show that the principles of multicultural education can be adapted contextually through gradual steps, such as the initial mapping of student diversity, the development of shared commitments between educators, and the integration of multicultural values in vocational programs and industrial work practices. However, challenges such as limited learning time, differences in student character, and sensitivity in instilling universal values remain the main obstacles. Therefore, policy support from school leaders and strengthening teacher capacity are key factors for the successful implementation of multicultural education in vocational schools [40].

The analysis reveals that multicultural education in vocational high schools is most effective when teachers function as strategic and multidimensional agents rather than as mere transmitters of knowledge. At SMKN 1 Talamau, teachers play a central role in transforming diversity from a potential source of social division into a constructive learning resource. This transformation occurs through consistent modeling of inclusive behavior, the facilitation of collaborative learning, and the mediation of social interactions among students from diverse backgrounds. Such practices demonstrate that multicultural values are internalized more effectively through lived experience than through normative instruction alone [41].

The findings also indicate that multicultural education in vocational settings must be closely linked to vocational objectives. Values such as cooperation, tolerance, discipline, and cross-cultural communication emerge as essential soft skills that support students' readiness for the workplace. Teachers strategically integrate these values into practical learning activities, group projects, and evaluation processes, thereby aligning character formation with professional competence.

CONCLUSION

The role of teachers in multicultural education in Vocational High Schools, including at SMKN 1 Talamau, is strategic, multidimensional, and transformative. Teachers serve as key actors in mediating diversity by transforming it from a potential source of tension to a constructive source of learning. Multicultural education in the context of vocational education demands a shift from a predominantly cognitive, text-based approach to social-emotional learning and hands-on learning experiences that are integrated into learning practices, school culture, and vocational activities. The successful implementation of the role of teachers in multicultural education is highly

dependent on cross-institutional systemic support. At the school level, institutionalizing multicultural education through explicit policies, shared commitments, and structured program management is a prerequisite for sustainable implementation. At the level of Education Personnel Education Institutions, strengthening the multicultural pedagogy curriculum and inclusive education in pre-service education programs and sustainable professional development is the key to improving teachers' conceptual and practical competence. At the national policy level, a coherent regulatory framework and adequate resource allocation are needed to ensure consistency of implementation in various educational contexts. By optimizing the strategic role of teachers supported by coordinated policies and institutions, SMKN 1 Talamau has the potential to become an example of vocational education practices that are not only oriented towards the printing of skilled workers, but also on the formation of graduates who are socially responsible, respect diversity, and contribute to strengthening social cohesion. Given the limitations of this study, which is still conceptual and contextual, follow-up research based on direct empirical data at SMKN 1 Talamau is recommended to develop a more operational, measurable, and adaptive multicultural education implementation model.

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Author's Contributions

Refinal conceptualized the study, designed methodology, and led fieldwork. Ismaiza Busti coordinated data collection, conducted interviews, and managed documentation. Julhadi performed data analysis and interpretation. Muhammad Youssef Al Deek contributed theoretical framing and comparative perspectives. All authors collaboratively drafted, revised, and approved the final manuscript, ensured methodological rigor, responded to reviewers, and agreed on accountability for the integrity and accuracy of the work, including ethical compliance, transparency, and respectful engagement with participants throughout the research process cycle.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no financial or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence this research. The study received no commercial funding, and all analyses were conducted independently. Institutional affiliations did not affect data interpretation or reporting. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained, and potential biases were addressed through reflexive practices. The authors affirm transparency, integrity, and adherence to scholarly standards throughout the research and publication process in line with international guidelines and journal policies and best practices.

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