# Insights into Multicultural Competence of Early Childhood Teacher Candidates in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education

**Hardiyanti Pratiwi[1]✉, Siti Irene Astuti Dwiningrum[2], Agus Riwanda[3], Sona Minasyan[4]**

[1]State University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[2]State University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[3]UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia
[4]Armenian State Pedagogical University, Armenia

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates multicultural attitudes among 168 ECE teacher candidates from four state Islamic universities in Indonesia, using a quantitative descriptive design and the Multicultural Attitudes Survey for Teachers. Results indicate a high average multicultural attitude score of 74.12, with candidates demonstrating confidence in managing multicultural classrooms and promoting cultural pride among children. However, their attitudes are primarily based on personal interactions rather than formal coursework. Interviews with 27 respondents further explore multicultural education practices during teaching practicum, revealing a need for improved collaboration with parents and greater emphasis on multicultural education in both teacher education and ECE curricula. Practical implications include integrating multicultural education into teacher education programs, fostering experiential learning for attitude development, and expanding multicultural education coverage in ECE curricula to enhance children's multicultural awareness.

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini menginvestigasi sikap multikultural di antara 168 calon guru PAUD dari empat universitas Islam negeri di Indonesia, menggunakan desain deskriptif kuantitatif dan Survei Sikap Multikultural untuk Guru. Hasil menunjukkan skor sikap multikultural rata-rata yang tinggi sebesar 74,12, dengan calon guru menunjukkan keyakinan dalam mengelola kelas multikultural dan mempromosikan kebanggaan budaya di kalangan anak-anak. Namun, sikap mereka lebih didasarkan pada interaksi pribadi daripada kursus formal. Wawancara dengan 27 responden lebih lanjut mengeksplorasi praktik pendidikan multikultural selama praktek mengajar, mengungkapkan perlunya peningkatan kerja sama dengan orang tua dan penekanan yang lebih besar pada pendidikan multikultural baik dalam pendidikan guru maupun kurikulum PAUD. Implikasi praktis meliputi integrasi pendidikan multikultural ke dalam program pendidikan guru, memfasilitasi pembelajaran eksperimental untuk pengembangan sikap, dan memperluas cakupan pendidikan multikultural dalam kurikulum PAUD untuk meningkatkan kesadaran multikultural anak-anak.*

**Email Corresponding**: [1]✉hardiyantipratiwi.2023@student.uny.ac.id, [2]siti_ireneastuti@uny.ac.id, [3]02050122021@student.uinsby.ac.id, [4]minasyan@projectchild.ngo

## Introduction

Indonesia is a country with vast and diverse geography where many ethnicities, dialects, and religious beliefs coexist (Latif & Hafid, 2021). The coexistence of diverse cultures in this country brings forth many possibilities and complexities. Amid the diversity of cultures and ethnicities, multicultural education in Indonesia holds significant importance (Suri & Chandra, 2021). Diversity in Indonesia is not just a feature; it is a fundamental element that greatly influences the social structure of a nation. Understanding and appreciating cultural diversity is crucial in fostering social harmony and unity, as multicultural education plays a vital role in these efforts (Huda dkk., 2020). In addition, Indonesian diversity greatly influences the preservation of native cultures, challenges stereotypes, and eliminates prejudices, thereby resulting in the progress of a more inclusive and tolerant society (Sahal dkk., 2018). Multicultural education is highly significant in developing global competencies, enabling individuals to effectively navigate the interconnected complexities of the world (Cuccurullo & Cinganotto, 2020) And enhancing the quality and relevance of education

Bank (2015) suggests that multicultural education should be more than just integrating multiculturalism into the curriculum. They propose a comprehensive approach that involves incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum. The goal of this approach is to address the power dynamics and systemic biases inherent in the education system. The importance of recognizing the historical and socio-political contexts of each cultural group is emphasized in Banks' perspective. This awareness drives the creation of a comprehensive educational environment that not only acknowledges diversity but also actively addresses the injustices embedded in the system (Bank & Bank, 2019).

Recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of students from various backgrounds is a core principle in education, and a crucial endeavor in this field is multicultural education (Doucette dkk., 2021; Parkhouse dkk., 2019). This initiative aims to advance equal opportunities in education by placing significant emphasis on developing inclusivity across various dimensions, including gender, social class, and diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds (Bank, 2015a). Education that values and celebrates diversity is not just about academic equality. Its goals are extensive, aiming to develop a deep understanding of diverse cultures, strong self-confidence, open-minded interactions with different perspectives, careful monitoring of biases, and the ability to advocate for personal and collective rights in the face of prejudice (Lin, 2020).

Introducing multicultural education at the preschool level is crucial because children are highly receptive to learning moral values and societal ethical standards during this critical period (Suri & Chandra, 2021). Research indicates that bias can be observed as early as the age of three when children begin to notice differences in skin color, eyes, and hair (Gardner-Neblett dkk., 2023; Waxman, 2021). Teachers of early childhood education play a significant role in developing children's awareness of diversity. Establishing an optimal environment for multicultural early childhood education heavily relies on fostering positive attitudes among teachers. (Stunell, 2021). To achieve this, teachers should thoroughly assess their own perspectives and beliefs. Given the importance of instilling positive values among preschool teachers, it becomes crucial to incorporate multicultural education training within this context (Arsal, 2019).

In global context, previous studies have highlighted efforts in professional development aimed at enhancing cross-cultural competencies among prospective early childhood education teachers. These studies underscore the importance of embedding

contextual approaches in professional development, integrating guided reflection, which has been proven effective in developing teachers' cross-cultural competencies (Cherng & Davis, 2019; Romijn et al., 2021). Furthermore, two specific studies highlight the impact of cross-cultural interaction experiences on pre-service early childhood educators' cultural competencies. Pedagogical strategies such as immersion and critical reflection emerge as effective ways to enhance cultural awareness and sensitivity among prospective educators (Anderson & Fees, 2018; Lash et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, research on multicultural education practices in early childhood encompasses various strategies such as contribution, enrichment, transformation, and problem-based learning as effective tools in creating conducive learning environments that acknowledge students' uniqueness while prioritizing multicultural values (Dakir et al., 2022; Suri & Chandra, 2021). Additionally, various studies in this domain also emphasize the need for early childhood educators to have a strong understanding and sensitivity to cross-cultural matters, considering the diverse cultural landscape in Indonesia (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Solehuddin & Budiman, 2019; Uyun & Warsah, 2022). Teacher education programs play a vital role in cultivating cross-cultural competencies among teacher candidates, thus preparing them to navigate the complexities of multicultural classrooms. Ongoing evaluation and refinement of multicultural teaching practices are highly urgent to ensure inclusivity and respect for diversity within educational environments (Safita & Suryana, 2022). This research focuses on the multicultural attitudes of prospective early childhood educators based on their field practice experiences. The main goal of this study is to evaluate the extent of positive multicultural attitudes among teacher candidates, which is a crucial factor in implementing culturally responsive teaching.

## Methods

This research employed a quantitative descriptive research design and survey method. It involved 168 early childhood education (ECE) teacher candidates who had completed Field Experience Practice (FEP) in four state Islamic universities in various provinces on the island of Kalimantan, namely UIN Antasari Banjarmasin, UIN Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda, IAIN Pontianak, and IAIN Palangkaraya. The objective of this research was to collect data on the multicultural attitudes developed by ECE teacher candidates after completing Field Experience Practice.

Data were collected using a questionnaire with closed-ended statements. We utilized the Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey, developed by Ponterotto et al. (1998). This survey consists of 20 items assessing multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Participants will rate each item on a five-point Likert scale. Data were collected using an online questionnaire via Google Forms. The survey was conducted from June 12th to August 18th, 2023, see table 1.

**Table 1.** Respondent Demographics

| Institution | Year | Gender Population | Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| UIN Antasari Banjarmasin | 2018 | Men 3, Women 63 | Male 3, Female 27 |
| | 2019 | Male 2, Female 62 | Male 2, Female 23 |
| UIN Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda | 2018 | Female 31 | Female 19 |
| | 2019 | Male 2, Female 25 | Female 16 |
| IAIN Palangkaraya | 2018 | Female 38 | Female 22 |
| | 2019 | Female 18 | Female 13 |
| IAIN Pontianak | 2018 | Men 2, Women 58 | Male 1, Female 20 |
| | 2019 | Female 53 | Female 22 |
| Total | | Population 357 individuals, sample 168 individuals | |

The population includes 357 early childhood education (ECE) teacher candidates. The Isaac Michael table recommends a minimum sample of 155 with a 10% significance level, which is surpassed by the sample of 168 ECE teachers. This ensures representativeness and adequacy in data collection, leading to reliable findings on prospective ECE teachers' multicultural attitudes post-Field Experience Practice.

Following the completion of the survey, the researchers proceeded to conduct in-depth interviews with 27 randomly selected respondents using the snowball sampling technique until data saturation was reached. Each respondent was interviewed for approximately 25-30 minutes, either through face-to-face group discussions, via Zoom, or using voice notes. These interviews aimed to deepen the understanding of the survey results. Data analysis from the in-depth interviews followed Miles and Huberman's model, involving three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

# Results and Discussion

## Results

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Items

| No | Statement | SA | A | N | DA | SDA | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I feel capable of teaching a culturally diverse group of children | 19.0 | 49.4 | 30.4 | | 1.2 | 3.85 | ,763 |
| 2 | I am able to adapt teaching methods to diverse children | 26.8 | 63.7 | 9.5 | | | 4.17 | ,579 |
| 3 | I feel burdened with the responsibility to foster children's multicultural awareness | 3.0 | 13.7 | 36.9 | 40.5 | 6.0 | 3.33 | ,892 |
| 4 | I have a responsibility to know the cultural background of children | 22.0 | 53.0 | 21.4 | 2.4 | 1.2 | 3.92 | ,797 |
| 5 | I provide an understanding to parents about the importance of multicultural awareness and tolerance | 29.2 | 58.3 | 10.1 | 2.4 | | 4.14 | ,686 |
| 6 | I am not responsible for fostering pride in any particular culture | 4.8 | 14.3 | 15.5 | 53.0 | 12.5 | 3.54 | 1,037 |
| 7 | My task becomes more difficult the more diverse the children in my class become | 4.8 | 17.3 | 45.2 | 25.0 | 7.7 | 3.14 | ,954 |
| 8 | I foster children's self-confidence in introducing their religion, culture, traditions and language to other people | 32.1 | 58.9 | 8.9 | | | 4.23 | ,599 |
| 9 | Children's limited interaction with people who have the same ethnicity, language or religion is a problem in multicultural education | 10.1 | 42.3 | 24.4 | 23.2 | | 3.39 | ,954 |
| 10 | I integrate material about various cultures, traditions and religions in learning | 10.7 | 49.4 | 30.4 | 8.3 | 1.2 | 3.60 | ,834 |
| 11 | Dealing with multicultural students has improved my teaching skills and broadened my horizons. | 23.8 | 61.9 | 14.3 | | | 4.10 | ,612 |

| No | Statement | SA | A | N | DA | SDA | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | I do not need training in multicultural education | 1.2 | 9.5 | 17.3 | 60.1 | 11.9 | 3.72 | ,840 |
| 13 | Developing collaborative activities with students across cultures, languages or religions seems ineffective | | 11.9 | 30.4 | 53.0 | 4.8 | 3.51 | ,766 |
| 14 | I invite parents to share their experiences and traditions with children | 23.2 | 49.4 | 23.8 | 3.6 | | 3.92 | ,782 |
| 15 | In my opinion, children should communicate in Indonesian with friends who speak different languages | 4.8 | 19.0 | 33.9 | 33.3 | 8.9 | 2.77 | 1,013 |
| 16 | In my opinion, the curriculum ignores multicultural aspects | 5.4 | 25.6 | 41.1 | 28.0 | | 2.92 | ,865 |
| 17 | Evaluating the success of multicultural education is not necessary in early childhood education | 2.4 | 4.8 | 25.0 | 58.9 | 8.9 | 3.67 | 0.800 |
| 18 | Children must have multicultural awareness to develop tolerance | 35.7 | 53.6 | 9.5 | 1.2 | | 4.24 | ,668 |
| 19 | Children's multicultural awareness can reduce the possibility of bullying due to differences in religion, ethnicity, language, skin color, socio-economic status and so on. | 33.3 | 54.8 | 8.9 | 1.8 | 1.2 | 4.17 | ,758 |
| 20 | Teaching students about cultural and religious diversity will only cause conflict in the classroom | 2.4 | 8.3 | 13.7 | 60.1 | 15.5 | 3.78 | ,892 |

**Table 3.** Likert Scale Indicators and Acronyms

| NO | Acronym | Information | Value Range* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | SA | Strongly agree | 5 |
| 2 | A | Agree | 4 |
| 3 | N | Neutral | 3 |
| 4 | DA | Don't agree | 2 |
| 5 | SDA | Strongly disagree | 1 |

*Reverse value if the statement is negative (Bold)

**Table 4.** Categorization of Respondents' Multicultural Attitudes

| Category | Value Range | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Low | X < M - 1SD<br>X < 60 - 13.3<br>X < 46.7 | - | |
| Currently | M - 1SD < X < M + 1SD<br>60 – 13.3 ≤ X 60 + 13.3<br>46.7 ≤ X < 73.3 | 65 | 38.7 |
| Tall | M + 1SD ≤<br>60 + 13.3 ≤<br>73.3 ≤ | 103 | 61.3 |

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics on the Results of the Multicultural Attitude Survey of Prospective ECE Teachers

| Statistical examples N: 168 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Mean** | 74.12 | **Range** | 34 |
| **median** | 74.50 | **Minimum** | 58 |
| **Mode** | 74 | **Maximum** | 92 |
| **Std. Deviation** | 6,996 | **Amount** | 12452 |

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents (68.4%) feel capable of teaching diverse cultural groups of children, demonstrating a good level of multicultural awareness and a relatively high level of confidence. Respondents 17 and 14 stated, "*We previously studied Pancasila and citizenship education, so we have some understanding of multicultural education to strengthen national unity.*" Additionally, respondents 22, 19,

and 05 expressed similar sentiments, "*In Islam, diversity is Allah's decree. Islam teaches to respect, act justly, and equally, as what distinguishes is the quality of piety.*" Furthermore, the majority of respondents (90.5%) feel capable of adapting teaching methods for diverse children. Based on the interview results, respondents stated that confidence in teaching in multicultural classrooms is influenced by several factors. Firstly, the high level of interaction with individuals from various ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and even religious backgrounds. Secondly, the existence of a common language that facilitates communication. Thirdly, the minimal noticeable differences that are difficult for children to accept, except in cases of disabilities.

Based on the interviews, one respondent stated, "*I didn't encounter difficulties because the differences weren't too noticeable. Children are already accustomed to making friends and blending in, even if they come from different ethnicities such as Banjar, Dayak, Javanese, Madurese, and Batak. If they have difficulty with language, they use Indonesian (R24).*" Another respondent added, "*I don't feel there are significant challenges. I am also used to interacting with friends from various ethnicities and languages. However, teaching children with different religions might be slightly more difficult. Besides struggling to understand their religious teachings, the curriculum also lacks accommodating differentiated learning materials (R17).*"

As many as 85.7% of respondents expressed positive responses that handling multicultural classrooms can improve their teaching abilities and broaden their perspectives. This is reflected in the different experiences shared by 5 respondents as they handle children with special needs in their classes. They require greater effort to foster attitudes of tolerance, mutual respect, and appreciation between regular children and those with special needs due to the noticeable differences for the children. Here are excerpts from their interviews, "*I am confident. However, based on experience, the more apparent the differences are, the harder it is for children to adjust. For example, if there is a child with special needs, I have to frequently emphasize the importance of respecting and caring for each other, helping each other. I also have to make an effort to instill positive motivation in children with special needs while preventing the possibility of bullying by their peers (R03).*" This statement is corroborated by another respondent, "*Our experience also grows because of these challenges (R11).*"

The survey shows that 46.5% of respondents don't see teaching multicultural attitudes as extra work for teachers. 36.9% had no opinion, suggesting uncertainty. Also, 77.9% believe the diversity in classrooms doesn't make teaching harder. Teachers expressed that they do not feel burdened because multicultural education materials are already covered in several themes taught, such as the theme of "My Indonesia." Here is a statement from respondent 08, "*I myself feel there is no additional burden because multicultural values are already discussed in one theme, 'My Indonesia.' Later, the theme has sub-themes on ethnicities and languages, traditional clothing and cuisine, traditional songs. In the theme 'My religion,' various religions, places of worship, and holy days are also explained.*" This statement was echoed by another respondent, "*Yes, it's covered in the themes. Later, there are activities like Kartini Day where various traditional costumes are used. This also introduces the diversity of Indonesia.*"

Furthermore, in the project to strengthen the Pancasila profile of preschool students, there are two themes related to multicultural education, namely "I love Indonesia" and "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika." Here is a quote from an interview with respondent 11, "*I did my FEP at a preschool that has implemented the Kurikulum Merdeka. There are two themes, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' and 'I love Indonesia.' Multicultural values such as tolerance, mutual respect, equality, and unity in diversity are highly encouraged.*" Respondents also

acknowledged being accustomed to reinforcing attitudes of tolerance, mutual respect, and fair treatment through example and messages to children. As expressed by respondent 19, "*We are used to being role models because children learn by imitation. Teachers become role models for children, so we exemplify attitudes of mutual respect, tolerance, not discriminating against friends based on ethnicity or language, socio-economic status, or disability.*" Respondent 22 reiterated, "*In addition to setting an example, I also often advise children to respect each other, help each other, and not discriminate against friends.*"

The research finds that 49.4% agree and 10.7% strongly agree on the need to broaden multicultural content in preschool curricula. Meanwhile, 31% believe current curricula overlook multicultural aspects. 41.1% had no opinion, suggesting uncertainty about curriculum coverage. This highlights concerns about the curriculum's effectiveness in preparing children for diverse societies. In this regard, respondent 06 expressed, "*The themes and sub-themes are determined by the teachers. The materials are also chosen by the teachers. I often share with other FEP friends. In the theme 'My Indonesia,' we usually only discuss the country's name, president, flag colors, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. There is no reinforcement of multicultural values because the learning activities are like coloring or matching ethnicities with traditional costumes. So, teachers' creativity needs to be enhanced.*" Respondent 15 added, "*I also observe how senior teachers teach. To set an example. It seems that storytelling activities are rarely done. However, multicultural stories could be shared with children to reinforce values.*"

The majority of respondents (75.6%) feel responsible for understanding the cultural backgrounds of children. The research also reveals that the majority of respondents (65.5%) feel responsible for fostering pride in specific cultures. This finding is further deepened through interviews with respondents, with 21 of them expressing similar statements. One respondent stated, "*Multicultural education is not just about respecting friends who are different, but also about valuing our own culture, so teachers encourage children to take pride in their culture, their language (R03).*" Another respondent mentioned, "*To strengthen children's pride in their culture, we must automatically get to know the backgrounds of the children. It seems like every preschool teacher should do this to be close to the children (R24).*"

The majority of respondents (91.0%) feel they have an important role in fostering children's confidence in introducing aspects of religion, culture, tradition, and language to others. Based on interviews with respondent 17, multicultural education does not erase differences, "*The reality is that we are different, both in ethnicity and religion. So, each child's identity must be strengthened so they understand the differences. Because it is through differences that tolerance and mutual respect are needed.*" Respondent 16 added, "*In the theme of 'my identity,' I create sub-themes about my religion and my culture. Each child is asked to talk about their religion and culture. What their worship looks like, the names of their places of worship, and their important days. What their ethnicity is, traditional clothing, and examples of their language. Before that, I ask parents to explain to the children and bring visual aids in the form of printouts of traditional clothing, places of worship, and more.*"

Most respondents (87.5%) believe they actively educate parents about multicultural awareness and tolerance. Additionally, 23.2% strongly agree and 49.4% agree on the significance of involving parents in their children's educational experiences. Interview quotes reinforce this survey result. For example, respondent 11 stated, "*In my experience, because I am still doing my FEP, I involve parents in supporting children's learning. For example, if there is a Kartini Day celebration tomorrow, the children are asked to wear traditional clothes and briefly talk about their culture. I send a message to the parents'*

*WhatsApp group so they can help prepare the children for the activity*." Another form of active role in providing understanding about the urgency of multicultural values is expressed by respondent 17, "*This is usually done through parenting activities or parent meetings. Preschools will explain the children's learning activities, their targets, and what focus they want to achieve, so there is synergistic support from parents in home learning activities.*" Respondent 01 added, "*I once created a bedtime story program. So, parents are asked to read stories to their children. I provide short stories. There are many values of tolerance, mutual respect, helping each other, and unity in diversity in those stories. This is also beneficial for parents, not just their children.*"

Based on the 89.3% of responses provided, there is a clear consensus among ECE teacher candidates regarding the importance of multicultural awareness for the development of children's tolerance. The majority of respondents believe that collaborative activities among children from different cultural and religious backgrounds, including differences in disabilities and socioeconomic conditions, can have a significant impact on enhancing children's appreciation and adaptability to differences. In interviews, respondent 10 stated, "*Tolerance must begin with introducing and familiarizing children with differences. For example, when making groups, I include children from different ethnicities.*" This statement is reinforced by respondent 24, "*Children in my ECE class are quite diverse. There are various ethnicities and two religions, Islam and Christianity. But I see that the children pay little attention to this concept of diversity; what matters to them is being friends. Maybe because the differences are not clearly visible.*"

The majority (52.4%) see limited interaction with same-ethnicity, language, or religion peers as an issue in multicultural education. Most respondents disagree with the idea that children should only speak Indonesian to friends of different languages. ECE teacher candidates might struggle with balancing respect for children's mother tongue and considering others' feelings. Respecting mother tongues is vital for cultural identity, yet fostering inclusivity and valuing diversity also matters. Respondents explained through interviews, "*If a child only befriends one ethnic group, there are indications of multicultural problems. However, it may not necessarily be due to negative prejudice. Perhaps they just have difficulty making friends due to language differences (R27).*" Another respondent expressed, "*There is one child, a newcomer, who only wants to be friends with children from the same ethnic group. Coincidentally, they are from the same ethnicity. I asked why not be friends with others? It turns out, he has difficulty adapting, different language (R12).*" Respondent 21 stated something different, "*I noticed that many children are now more proficient in using Indonesian. Maybe they have been taught by their parents to make friends easily. The ECE institution where I did my FEP is in a transmigrant area. There are many Banjar, Javanese, and Madurese ethnicities. If they are from the same ethnicity, they also use Indonesian. Sometimes they also use their own ethnic language.*"

As many as 88.1% of respondents believe that multicultural awareness among children can help reduce bullying related to differences in religion, ethnicity, language, skin color, socioeconomic status, and other factors. This research reveals that prospective ECE teachers are highly dedicated to fostering multicultural awareness among children as a means to create a more accepting and inclusive educational environment. Interviews with respondents reinforce this notion. Respondent 21 stated, "*If children are accustomed to interacting with different friends, they will become accustomed to differences. So, they will learn to respect each other.*" Respondent 19 added, "*Bullying is sometimes triggered by negative attitudes towards differences. That's why teachers in ECE are emphasized to foster mutual respect and tolerance, both in and out of the classroom.*" A similar view was expressed by respondent 08, "*If a child is naughty, well, that's just how it is. There are many*

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*influences from socialization, media, family, and more. But I believe multicultural education is very important to cultivate tolerant attitudes and respect for differences*."

Based on the survey results, the majority of ECE teacher candidates (75.6%) stated that teaching students about cultural and religious diversity does not lead to conflict in the classroom. Recognizing the importance of cultural and religious diversity, ECE teacher candidates understand that teaching about these topics is not a source of conflict, but rather an important way to foster understanding and tolerance. Respondent 21 stated, "*Multicultural education has two focuses, understanding differences and instilling tolerance. If it's just about understanding differences, it might lead to conflict.*" This statement is reinforced by respondent 17, "*As I mentioned before, diversity is a fact of life. So, teachers must set an example and cultivate positive attitudes in these children to appreciate differences, so they get used to it and don't make a big deal out of it.*"

The majority of respondents feel that evaluating the success of multicultural education is necessary in early childhood education. This indicates a strong perception that even at the early childhood level, specific evaluation related to multicultural approaches is still necessary to ensure the effectiveness of multicultural education at this level. Here are the results of interviews with respondents 03, "*Yes, if there are bullying problems due to ethnic or religious differences, further evaluation can be done.*" Respondent 17 added, "*There is also evaluation in the thematic subthemes. So, it's sufficient.*" Meanwhile, respondents 06 and 15 expressed similar sentiments, "*If children are seen to be accustomed to making friends, interacting with other children from different ethnic or religious backgrounds, it means multicultural education has succeeded.*"

Most respondents (72.4%) believe they require training in multicultural education, showing awareness of its importance for handling its challenges. This highlights a significant need for such training, implying that higher education curriculum coverage on multicultural education remains limited. Respondent 05 expressed, "*In my program, multicultural material is included in the social-emotional development of children course. So, the discussion is not very thorough. Additional training is needed.*" Meanwhile, respondent 23 stated, "*There is an elective course on multicultural education. However, if students don't choose it much, they are usually directed to other courses.*" Respondent 14 reinforced, "*Multicultural education should be a core course, or there should be additional training for students.*" Similar sentiments were echoed by respondent 21, "*Since there is no in-depth discussion, I have to share a lot with friends or seek inspiration on the internet to teach topics that contain multicultural values.*"

## Discussion

### The level of multicultural attitudes among teacher candidates

The survey conducted on 168 early childhood education (ECE) teacher candidates highlight varying understandings of multicultural attitudes within the theoretical framework of multicultural education. With an average score of 74.12 falling within the range of 73.3 ≤, there is a positive tendency to acknowledge and integrate cultural diversity into educational practices. The high average score reflects a positive potential for multiculturalism. However, early childhood education teacher programs only offer elective courses on multicultural education, not core courses. High interactions with individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds significantly influence respondents' multicultural attitudes. Additionally, the integration of values such as tolerance and mutual respect through Pancasila and civic education, as well as the implementation of Islamic teachings, demonstrates a multifaceted approach to promoting

multiculturalism. The Islamic perspective on diversity as a natural state and God's decree emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation among individuals, transcending ethnic or cultural boundaries. This underscores the interconnectedness of culture, religion, and citizenship in promoting inclusivity and respecting diversity within the educational context.

Previous research on multicultural education within Muslim communities provides rich insights into the conceptualization, implementation, and challenges in developing multicultural attitudes and practices. The research emphasizes the importance of exploring Islamic teachings and principles regarding multicultural education (Adnan et al., 2021; Prabowo & Ilyas, 2021). Several studies also delve into the practical implementation of multicultural education in Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. They highlight how these institutions have evolved to embrace modern values of democracy, civil society, and cultural diversity while remaining rooted in Islamic teachings (Latif & Hafid, 2021; Mashuri et al., 2024). However, they also acknowledge challenges such as teacher competence, unclear multicultural goals, and unequal relationships among students, underscoring the complexity of integrating multicultural education into traditional educational environments. Research on multicultural education within Muslim communities in Indonesia explores the translation of multicultural education policies into practices in various educational contexts, revealing inconsistencies and challenges due to unclear policies and inadequate implementation strategies (D. G. Raihani & Drysdale, 2013; R. Raihani, 2018). Dedicating more time and focus to the development of academic skills and inclusivity will enhance the dynamics of multicultural classrooms (Taylor dkk., 2023). This highlights the urgency of specialized training to address emerging challenges and ensure effective administration within diverse educational environments (Pratiwi dkk., 2023).

**Implications for curriculum and policy**

The multicultural curriculum and school policies are crucial variables that significantly influence the success of multicultural education (Muzayanah, 2017). Both of these variables can create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment, characterized by strong relationships, a pleasant climate, and mutual respect, thus positively impacting the academic and social achievements of children, especially those from minority backgrounds (Black-Hawkins et al., 2022; Khalfaoui et al., 2021). The incorporation of key concepts of multicultural education into curriculum design and evaluation aligns with the broader discourse on integrating multicultural values into the framework of education (Gorski & Dalton, 2020; Gorski & Parekh, 2020).

The importance of teaching methods in creating a harmonious multicultural environment cannot be overlooked. Teachers facilitate the internalization of multicultural values by fostering a climate of mutual respect within the school environment and employing teaching methods such as multicultural storytelling, introduction to customs and cultures, religious festivals, field trips, traditional games, and collaborative projects involving children from diverse backgrounds (Dini, 2022; Junanto & Fajrin, 2020; Soekmono & Ningtyas, 2020). Syahrul (2020) founds four effective approaches in multicultural classrooms: contribution, additive, transformation, and social action. The contribution approach values the unique contributions of various cultural groups. The additive approach adds additional cultural materials to the existing curriculum to enrich students' understanding of cultural diversity. The transformation approach aims to change the educational structure to be more inclusive and fair. The social action approach emphasizes social change to address injustice in society.

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The findings of this research are consistent with evidence supporting the positive benefits of using culturally relevant materials and pedagogical methods in the context of early childhood education (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Each individual brings the uniqueness of their cultural heritage into the educational environment (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). This means that education should respect and take into account cultural diversity in learning, thus fostering tolerance and empathy (Ningrum & Wardhani, 2021). These inclusive strategies promote recognition of individual differences, ensuring that all students feel valued and acknowledged in their educational environment, which in turn can strengthen solidarity and unity, reduce bullying cases, and mitigate the influence of extremism from an early age (Mauharir et al., 2022; Noventue & Ediyono, 2023). Furthermore, previous research has also revealed various effective media for young children such as stories, songs, games, and other collaborative activities that introduce them to the concept of diversity (Muin, 2013). Through stories, especially when accompanied by illustrations, children are introduced to cultural diversity from around the world, enabling them to gain an understanding of how to connect with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bonner et al., 2018).

Issues such as ethnic and religious differences are the most common triggers for friction in Indonesia, which is why multicultural education must pay special attention to these issues. The concept of religious moderation is one concrete effort in multicultural education. The values of religious moderation can also be internalized in early childhood education environments with the help of suitable media (Umar et al., 2021). The goals of religious moderation in the context of multicultural education are (1) fostering tolerance among groups of children with different religions; (2) promoting peace in their social environment; (3) facilitating interfaith dialogue; and (4) instilling openness between religions and rejecting hate speech both inside and outside of schools (Suprapto, 2020). The research reveals that religious education serves as an effective means for internalizing multicultural character values through content that strengthens cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Hidayati, 2016; Isom et al., 2021; Sihombing, 2021).

The cultivation of multicultural values and the enhancement of tolerance align with literature that establishes a relationship between cross-cultural awareness and positive outcomes in bullying prevention (Maunder & Crafter, 2018). The teachers agree that increasing multicultural awareness effectively reduces oppression. Consistent with this research, Prasiska (2020) emphasized that multicultural education is a crucial factor in reducing violence against or among children.

This research also confirms previous findings stating the importance of ongoing communication between families and teachers to create a pleasant classroom environment free from violence (Rios-Gonzalez dkk., 2019). The positive response to parental involvement, as well as the need for better approaches, highlights the importance of collaboration between parents and teachers in fostering an enjoyable learning environment (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Previous research highlights that tolerance, compared to honesty and discipline, is a character trait that receives low attention from parents (Nazarullail & Maskulin, 2023).

Recognition of the difficulties associated with limited cultural connections reinforces the previous demands for teachers to enhance their cultural sensitivity and awareness (Ramsay-Jordan, 2020; Shiver dkk., 2020). Hayadin (2020) emphasized that although there are laws in Indonesia guaranteeing equal treatment for every child in multicultural classrooms, especially regarding religious education, their implementation is still not optimal. Positive responses to improving skills in handling multicultural classroom spaces are consistent with broader discussions about changes in teachers' responsibilities

to accommodate various student groups (Parkhouse dkk., 2019). This research underscores the challenge teachers encounter in balancing a child's cultural confidence with fostering respect for peers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Yet, boosting children's confidence through their own culture yields positive developmental outcomes in early childhood (McNally & Slutsky, 2018).

This research emphasizes the importance for teachers to understand and appreciate diversity among children. Constructive interaction between teachers and students, characterized by assistance, personalized feedback, and attentive communication, reduces conflict and disruptive behavior (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020; Poling dkk., 2022). Improving teacher-student relationships and fostering a pleasant classroom environment can be achieved by prioritizing personal connections with all students, getting to know their backgrounds, and establishing clear norms that enhance a sense of security (Hunter dkk., 2021). Creating an environment that encourages open communication and values equal speaking opportunities throughout the class will foster the development of closer friendships among students (Duque dkk., 2021). The collaboration and communication among teachers serve as a small example for students to socialize with peers of different religions (Tamwifi & Akbar, 2023).

## Conclusion

This research found that 61.3% of respondents have a high multicultural attitude, while the remaining 38.7% are in the moderate category. It underscores the necessity of ongoing training for strengthening confidence and skills in handling cultural differences, despite positive feedback on implementing teaching strategies in multicultural classrooms. Highlighting the importance of unbiased racial competencies for teachers suggests a need for targeted professional development. Teachers' multifaceted roles in fostering multicultural awareness and maintaining inclusive learning environments require ongoing dedication. Appreciating diversity among children is crucial, as shown by this research, which attributes high multicultural attitudes among teacher candidates to increased interaction with diverse individuals outside formal education. The inadequacy of multicultural education coverage in ECE institution curricula indicates a gap between policy and practice. Encouraging parental awareness of different cultures is also crucial, as emphasized in our findings.

This research highlights the importance of focused professional development programs, curriculum development, and ongoing collaboration between teachers and parents to ensure alignment with multicultural education principles. Early childhood education teacher training programs need to offer specific courses related to multicultural education or deepen through training and experiential learning. Further research could explore the development of multicultural education curricula for early childhood, analyze any cultural biases teachers may exhibit towards children from different backgrounds, and examine parent involvement programs in multicultural education.

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