



THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN MULTICULTURAL LEARNING IN THE ERA OF KURIKULUM MERDEKA

Yusawinur Barella¹, Hasyim Haddade², Yuspiani³, & Hifza⁴

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia

⁴Universitas Sultan Muhammad Syafiuddin Sambas, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: yusawinurbarella@untan.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia emphasizes developing global diversity character through multicultural education. While digital technology has become integral to learning strategies, its specific role in multicultural adaptation remains under-explored. This qualitative phenomenological study examines how digital technology supports multicultural learning implementation in primary schools operating under Kurikulum Merdeka. Conducted at Pelita Cemerlang Private Elementary School, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, the research involved four teachers, one principal, and three parents through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis over three months. Findings reveal digital technology plays four critical roles: facilitating cultural diversity exposure through YouTube and audiovisual materials, enhancing interactive learning through PowerPoint presentations, supporting Project-Based Learning (P5) documentation and presentation, and bridging home-school collaboration through digital communication platforms. Teachers reported increased student engagement and cultural curiosity when technology was integrated with multicultural content. However, challenges emerged in content localization, teacher digital competency gaps, and balancing digital with experiential learning. Students demonstrated enhanced tolerance, expanded friendship circles across ethnic and religious boundaries, and increased cultural curiosity. The study concludes that digital technology serves as an effective enabler for multicultural education when purposefully integrated with culturally responsive pedagogy, contributing to the development of inclusive, harmonious communities in diverse societies.

Keywords: Digital technology; Multicultural learning; Kurikulum Merdeka; Global diversity character; Elementary education; Culturally responsive pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, characterized by over 17,000 islands and approximately 1,300 distinct ethnic groups, represents one of the world's most culturally diverse nations (Buttenheim & Nobles, 2009). While this extraordinary diversity constitutes a valuable source of cultural capital, it simultaneously poses significant educational challenges, particularly in cultivating social cohesion and mutual

understanding among heterogeneous populations (Parker et al., 2018). West Kalimantan province exemplifies this complexity, being home to three predominant ethnic communities, Dayak, Malay, and Chinese, alongside numerous other ethnic populations, creating a microcosm of Indonesia's broader multicultural landscape (König, 2016).

The historical context of West Kalimantan underscores the critical importance of multicultural education. Between 1996 and 2001, the region experienced three major ethnic conflicts in Sanggau Ledo, Sambas, and Pontianak, resulting in approximately 1,000 fatalities and displacing over 50,000 individuals (de Jonge & Nooteboom, 2006; Nakaya, 2018). These tragic events illuminate the potential consequences of inadequate attention to intercultural understanding and highlight education's crucial role in preventing similar conflicts. Consequently, implementing effective multicultural education strategies has become not merely an educational priority but a social imperative for promoting peaceful coexistence in diverse societies.

In response to pandemic-era learning disruptions and the need for educational reform, the Indonesian government introduced Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) in 2021, marking a paradigm shift toward competency-based, student-centered learning (Marzuki, 2023). A distinguishing feature of this curriculum is its emphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly the "Global Diversity" (*Berkebhinnekaan Global*) dimension, which aims to cultivate students who maintain strong local cultural identities while demonstrating openness and respect toward other cultures (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This dimension encompasses four key elements: recognizing and appreciating cultures, intercultural communication and interaction, reflection and responsibility toward diversity experiences, and social justice orientation.

Concurrently, digital technology integration in Indonesian classrooms has accelerated dramatically, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated emergency remote teaching and catalyzed technological adoption in educational settings (Rahmayanti, 2024). However, while substantial research examines technology's role in enhancing academic achievement and pedagogical practices (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2013; Mensah et al., 2018), limited scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how digital technology specifically supports multicultural learning objectives within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. This gap is particularly significant given Banks' (1993) assertion that effective multicultural education requires deliberate, systematic integration across all educational dimensions, including instructional methods and materials.

Recent international scholarship suggests that technology, when purposefully integrated, can enhance intercultural understanding by providing access to diverse cultural representations, facilitating cross-cultural communication, and supporting identity exploration (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). However, concerns persist regarding potential drawbacks, including Western-centric content bias, superficial cultural engagement, and the digital divide exacerbating educational inequalities (Wati et al., 2023). Additionally, teacher competency in both technological and multicultural domains emerges as a critical mediating factor influencing implementation effectiveness (Gross, 2024; Jia & Nasri, 2019).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating how elementary school teachers integrate digital technology into multicultural learning practices under Kurikulum Merdeka implementation. Specifically, the research examines: (1) integration strategies teachers employ

when utilizing digital technology for multicultural education; (2) types of digital tools perceived as most effective in promoting cultural diversity understanding; (3) challenges encountered in technology, enhanced multicultural instruction; and (4) perceived impacts on students' attitudes and behaviors toward diversity. By exploring these dimensions through a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research contributes both theoretical insights extending Banks' multicultural education framework and practical guidance for educators and policymakers in diverse, developing-nation contexts.

2. METHODS

This qualitative inquiry employed a phenomenological approach to explore educators' lived experiences integrating digital technology into multicultural learning within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Phenomenology, as articulated by (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), enables researchers to understand the essence of human experiences by examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and ascribe meaning to particular phenomena. This methodological orientation proved particularly appropriate for investigating technology integration in multicultural education, as it allowed for deep exploration of teachers' perspectives, decision-making processes, and interpretations of implementation outcomes. The study was conducted at Pelita Cemerlang Private Elementary School, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, selected through purposive sampling based on: (1) student demographic diversity representing major ethnic groups and multiple religious traditions; (2) active Kurikulum Merdeka implementation; (3) established multicultural education initiatives; and (4) technological infrastructure supporting digital pedagogy. Research participants were purposively selected comprising four classroom teachers from grades 1-4 representing ethnic diversity (two Malay, one Dayak, one Chinese) with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 18 years, one school principal with 15 years of educational leadership experience, and three parents representing different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The school serves 785 students with religious demographic distribution including 32% Muslim, 26% Protestant Christian, 67% Catholic, 1% Hindu, and 66% Buddhist students, providing an authentic multicultural context for investigation.

Data collection occurred over three months (October-December 2024) through multiple complementary methods enabling methodological triangulation. First, semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted with each participant following Rabionet's (2011) guidelines, addressing technology selection and integration strategies, effectiveness perceptions, implementation challenges, and observed impacts on student learning. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Second, classroom observations were conducted across 12 sessions (three per participating teacher), each lasting approximately 90 minutes, focusing on lessons incorporating technology and multicultural content. Observation protocols documented types of technology employed, student-technology interactions, teacher facilitation strategies, and student engagement indicators. Third, document analysis examined curricular materials including lesson plans, P5 project modules, student work samples, and school policy documents. Finally, a 120-minute Focus Group Discussion involving three teachers was conducted for exploring collective insights and member checking. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, facilitated by NVivo 12 Plus software. The process

commenced with transcription and familiarization, wherein all recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly. Initial coding involved systematic examination generating 127 initial codes. Theme development proceeded through iterative analysis, grouping related codes into potential themes representing patterns of meaning. Collaborative theme refinement resulted in four overarching themes. Interpretation examined themes through Banks' (1993) multicultural education dimensions and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory.

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria, credibility through prolonged engagement, methodological triangulation, and member checking; transferability through thick description; dependability through detailed audit trails; and confirmability through reflexive journaling. Ethical approval was obtained from Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent, pseudonyms protected confidentiality, and data were stored securely with encryption.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis revealed four interrelated themes characterizing digital technology's role in multicultural learning: (1) technology as cultural window; (2) interactive pedagogies through digital platforms; (3) implementation challenges; and (4) impacts on student intercultural competence. These themes integrate empirical findings with theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

Technology as Cultural Window: Expanding Diversity Exposure

All teacher participants emphasized digital technology's capacity to provide access to cultural representations beyond students' immediate environments, effectively functioning as a "window" into diverse cultural worlds. YouTube videos emerged as the predominant medium, with teachers systematically curating content showcasing Indonesia's regional diversity, traditional ceremonies, cultural performances, daily life in various ethnic communities, and religious observances across faith traditions. This finding aligns with Chamberlin-Quinlisk's (2013) assertion that media and technology provide unprecedented access to cultural information, facilitating intercultural understanding. However, this study extends previous research by revealing significant content localization challenges.

Unlike Western contexts with abundant multicultural digital resources (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018), Indonesian teachers, particularly in peripheral regions like West Kalimantan, encountered difficulties locating content representing specific local diversity rather than dominant Javanese or international cultures. Teachers invested considerable time curating culturally appropriate content or creating original materials reflecting West Kalimantan's Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities. This localization imperative suggests that effective technology integration in multicultural education requires not merely technological access but culturally responsive digital content creation (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). The absence of locally relevant digital resources may inadvertently perpetuate cultural marginalization, undermining multicultural education goals.

Interactive Pedagogies Through Digital Platforms

Beyond providing cultural content, digital technology enabled interactive, student centered pedagogical approaches aligned with both multicultural education principles and Kurikulum Merdeka's learner centered philosophy. Teachers utilized PowerPoint presentations to structure multicultural lessons, incorporating visual elements facilitating cultural comparisons across ethnic groups. More significantly, technology facilitated Project-Based Learning (P5) aligned with the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* theme. Students employed tablets for cultural research, investigating traditions and practices of various Indonesian ethnic groups. Digital photography documented hands-on cultural activities, with students subsequently creating digital presentations synthesizing their learning.

This process exemplifies what Kieran & Anderson (2019) term culturally responsive pedagogy integrated with Universal Design for Learning, providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression while maintaining cultural relevance. The integration of technology with collaborative activities reflects Vygotskian sociocultural learning principles (Vygotsky, 1978), wherein digital tools become cultural artifacts mediating peer interaction and knowledge co-construction about diversity. This finding supports recent scholarship demonstrating technology's potential to enhance multicultural learning when embedded within sound pedagogical frameworks (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Blanchet-Cohen & Reilly, 2013).

However, participants emphasized that technology effectiveness depended critically on pedagogical framing. Videos showing cultural diversity became meaningful educational experiences because teachers structured discussions around them, posed critical questions, and connected content to students' lived experiences. This integration of digital and experiential learning suggests that technology should complement rather than replace direct cultural encounters, consistent with findings regarding balanced approaches in multicultural education (Arphattananon, 2021).

Implementation Challenges: Competency, Content, and Connectivity

Despite technology's affordances, participants identified three interconnected implementation challenges, teacher competency gaps, content localization difficulties, and infrastructure limitations. Regarding competency, not all teachers demonstrated equal confidence or skill in technology integration. Some struggled with evaluating content quality and cultural authenticity, operating presentation software efficiently, troubleshooting technical issues during lessons, and balancing technology use with hands-on cultural experiences. These findings resonate with research identifying multicultural education competency gaps among teachers in diverse classrooms (Gross, 2024; Kuppens et al., 2020).

The research site addressed competency development through systematic approaches. Weekly teacher learning groups provided ongoing professional development, with educators collaboratively exploring technology tools, sharing successful strategies, and troubleshooting challenges. This model reflects principles of effective professional learning, sustained duration, collaborative inquiry, and active learning focused on specific instructional problems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Content localization challenges extended beyond availability to encompass cultural authenticity concerns. Teachers questioned whether available digital

representations accurately portrayed cultural groups or perpetuated stereotypes, reflecting broader debates about cultural representation authenticity in multicultural education (Grant & Khurshid, 2009).

Infrastructure limitations, while less severe than in under-resourced schools, occasionally disrupted technology-enhanced lessons. Internet connectivity fluctuations necessitated contingency planning, teachers downloading videos beforehand and preparing non-digital alternative activities. This finding highlights the digital divide's multifaceted nature, encompassing not only device access but reliable connectivity (Wibowo et al., 2025). However, the research site's basic technological infrastructure enabled substantial multicultural learning enhancement, suggesting that even modest technology investments can yield significant educational benefits when coupled with effective pedagogy.

Impacts on Student Intercultural Competence

Participants reported observable shifts in students' intercultural attitudes and behaviors attributable to technology-enhanced multicultural learning. Three impact categories emerged: increased cultural curiosity and openness, enhanced tolerance and respect for differences, and expanded intercultural friendship networks. Teachers and parents noted students' heightened interest in cultural differences following technology-mediated exposure. Students initiated conversations about cultural practices, asked questions about religious differences with appropriate sensitivity, and demonstrated eagerness to learn about ethnic traditions. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that multicultural education practices positively influence student engagement in diverse learning environments (Abacioglu et al., 2023).

Enhanced tolerance manifested through specific behavioral changes. Students demonstrated greater respect for religious and ethnic differences in classroom interactions, participated willingly in multicultural activities without displaying discomfort, defended peers from different backgrounds during playground conflicts, and exhibited curiosity rather than judgment toward unfamiliar cultural practices. Parents observed their children forming friendships across ethnic and religious boundaries. These observations suggest that technology-enhanced multicultural learning may contribute to developing intercultural and global competence, the capacity to understand, appreciate, and interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Papadopoulou et al., 2022).

Interestingly, one parent connected school-based diversity experiences to enhanced adaptability in international contexts, suggesting that multicultural education enhanced through technology providing global cultural exposure may develop transferable intercultural competencies applicable beyond familiar contexts. This supports arguments for education preparing Indonesian students for global citizenship while maintaining cultural rootedness (Budimansyah & Pangalila, 2022). However, the extent to which these elementary school behaviors predict long-term intercultural competence remains uncertain, highlighting the need for longitudinal research tracking students' intercultural development over time.

Theoretical Integration with Banks Framework

Findings can be interpreted through Banks (1993) five dimensions of multicultural education, with technology serving as a cross-cutting facilitator. Regarding Content Integration,

technology exponentially expanded cultural content available for curriculum inclusion, though localization challenges persisted. The Knowledge Construction Process was enhanced through technology-mediated inquiry, wherein students investigated how cultural knowledge is created and represented. Prejudice Reduction appeared supported through technology providing positive intergroup contact opportunities, albeit virtual. Technology mediated cultural exposure may present diverse groups in positive, non-threatening contexts, potentially fulfilling conditions for prejudice reduction (Allport, 1954).

Equity Pedagogy was facilitated through technology enabling differentiated instruction visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities; varied pacing through video replay capabilities; and multiple representation forms accommodating diverse learning styles (Kuppens et al., 2020). Finally, the Empowering School Culture dimension was indirectly supported through technology facilitating home-school communication via WhatsApp, enabling parental engagement in multicultural initiatives and creating consistency between school and home environments. This integration demonstrates technology's potential to enhance all dimensions of multicultural education when purposefully implemented within culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations constrain this study's conclusions. First, the single-site, private school setting with relatively strong infrastructure may not represent typical Indonesian public schools facing greater resource constraints. Generalizability is further limited by the small, purposive sample and qualitative methodology prioritizing depth over breadth. Second, the study relied predominantly on teacher and parent perceptions rather than direct student outcome measures. While observational data supplemented interview findings, standardized intercultural competence assessments would strengthen conclusions about learning impacts. Third, the three month timeframe captured only short-term implementation experiences, precluding examination of long-term sustainability or outcomes.

Future research should address these limitations through several directions. Comparative studies across diverse school types would illuminate how contextual factors shape technology's role in multicultural education. Mixed-methods or experimental designs employing validated intercultural competence measures could provide more robust evidence of learning outcomes (Yilmaz, 2016). Longitudinal studies tracking students' intercultural development over multiple years would reveal whether elementary school experiences predict adolescent and adult intercultural competence. Additionally, research investigating culturally appropriate digital content development processes would inform practical resource creation efforts. Finally, studies examining technology integration in multicultural teacher education programs could address identified competency development challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital technology, when purposefully integrated with culturally responsive pedagogy, effectively enables multicultural education within Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka framework. Four critical roles emerged: providing cultural exposure through

audiovisual content, facilitating interactive student-centered pedagogies, supporting Project-Based Learning aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, and strengthening home-school communication. However, success faces challenges including content localization difficulties, teacher competency gaps, and balancing digital with experiential learning. Effective integration requires culturally responsive content reflecting local diversity, sustained teacher professional development addressing both technological and multicultural competencies, and pedagogical approaches positioning technology as tools for deeper cultural understanding rather than ends in themselves.

The findings carry significant implications for educational practice in diverse societies implementing competency-based curricula. Teachers should prioritize content curation reflecting local cultural diversity while combining technology with direct cultural experiences. School leaders must invest in continuous professional development and create teacher learning communities for sharing effective strategies. Policymakers should develop repositories of culturally appropriate digital content representing Indonesia's diverse regions, particularly peripheral areas often marginalized in national narratives, and integrate technology considerations into multicultural education guidelines and teacher preparation standards. Students' increased cultural curiosity, expanded friendship circles transcending ethnic and religious boundaries, and enhanced tolerance suggest that thoughtfully designed technology-enhanced multicultural education can contribute significantly to building more inclusive, harmonious communities as Indonesia navigates preserving cultural diversity while preparing students for an interconnected world.

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