

**MULTICULTURAL LEARNING STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP STUDENT CHARACTER AT
TUNAS KARYA COMAL VOCATIONAL SCHOOL**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the implementation of multicultural-based learning strategies as an effort to develop student character at Tunas Karya Comal Vocational High School. The background of this research stems from the needs of 21st-century education, which demands not only mastery of knowledge and skills but also character development that respects socio-cultural diversity. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, with subjects including general and vocational subject teachers and 11th-grade students. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that multicultural-based learning strategies were implemented through cross-group discussions, social projects based on national values, the integration of character values into vocational practice, and contextual learning based on local culture. The implementation of these strategies fostered student character in aspects of tolerance, social empathy, discipline, responsibility, independence, and open-mindedness. Teachers served as mediators of multicultural values, learning facilitators, and role models, creating an inclusive and equitable school climate. Despite facing challenges such as limited understanding among new teachers and a lack of multicultural teaching materials, the school has implemented solutions through teacher training, the development of diversity-based teaching materials, and the establishment of a school culture that values differences. Overall, the results show that multicultural learning strategies are effective in developing tolerant, adaptive, and integrated student character, and are relevant for application in vocational education in a diverse global era.

Keywords: Multicultural Education; Learning Strategies; Character Development; Vocational Schools; Tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

21st-century education presents complex challenges and demands on the world of education, particularly in preparing students to compete in an era of globalization rife with rapid change and socio-cultural diversity. Students must not only be equipped with academic or technical skills, but also possess critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative thinking skills, as well as strong character and noble morals. In the context of an increasingly open global environment, humanitarian values, tolerance, and respect for differences are essential assets for the younger generation to live harmoniously amidst diversity (Yusuf & Tajab, 2023).

Indonesia, as a diverse nation with diverse ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, requires an educational approach that fosters mutual respect, appreciation of differences, and awareness of the importance of peaceful coexistence. In this regard, multicultural education is a strategic approach to instilling these values. Multicultural education not only teaches knowledge about diversity but also fosters empathy, a sense of justice, and the ability to interact positively in a pluralistic society. Through this approach, schools are expected to become miniature models of society that instill the values of brotherhood, tolerance, and inclusivity (Fitria, 2023).

As a vocational education institution located in a community with diverse social and cultural backgrounds, SMK Tunas Karya Comal plays a strategic role in shaping the character of the younger generation. As a school that prepares students to enter the workforce, the challenges faced are not only in the aspect of skills (hard skills), but also in developing soft skills such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and adaptability in a multicultural environment. The increasingly global world of work requires SMK graduates to be not only competent in their fields, but also able to work in cross-cultural teams and respect differences in views and values.

However, in practice, character education in vocational schools often faces challenges, such as low student awareness of moral and social values, the influence of individualistic digital culture, and the lack of integration of multicultural values into the learning process. Therefore, innovative and contextual learning strategies are needed, oriented not only toward cognitive learning outcomes but also toward shaping attitudes and behaviors that reflect multicultural values.

Based on this, this study focuses on multicultural-based learning strategies as an effort to develop student character at SMK Tunas Karya Comal. Through the implementation of this learning strategy, it is hoped that an inclusive learning environment can be created, respecting diversity, and encouraging students to become individuals with integrity, tolerance, and adaptability to differences in the workplace and society. Thus, education at vocational schools will not only produce skilled workers, but also individuals with character and multicultural insight, in accordance with the spirit of national education to shape the whole person.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach because it aims to describe in-depth how multicultural learning strategies are implemented at SMK Tunas Karya Comal and how these strategies contribute to student character development. A qualitative approach was chosen so that researchers could understand the phenomenon in a natural and holistic way through direct interactions with teachers and students in the school environment.

The research was conducted at SMK Tunas Karya Comal, a vocational school with diverse students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. This situation provides an interesting context for examining how multicultural values are applied in the learning process and daily school life.

The research subjects consisted of general and vocational subject teachers, as well as eleventh-grade students. Teachers were chosen because they play a key role in designing and implementing learning, including how multicultural values are integrated into the learning activities. Meanwhile, the eleventh-grade students were chosen because they already had more than a year of experience studying at the school, thus being considered to have a good understanding of the atmosphere and values applied in their learning environment.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted directly in the classroom to observe how teachers teach, how students interact, and how values such as tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect emerge in learning activities. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain more in-depth information about their views and experiences regarding the implementation of multicultural-based learning. Furthermore, documentation was conducted by collecting various supporting evidence such as photographs of learning activities, teaching materials (lessons learned,

syllabi, modules), and curriculum documents that demonstrate the presence of multicultural values in the educational process (Mehrad et al., 2024)

The collected data was then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) analysis model, which includes three stages. First, data reduction, which is the process of selecting and simplifying field data to focus on important aspects related to the research objectives. Second, data presentation, which is organizing the data into an easily understood narrative description that depicts the actual situation in the field. Third, conclusion drawing, which is the stage in which researchers interpret the meaning of the data obtained to discover patterns, relationships, and important findings related to the implementation of multicultural learning (Thalib, 2022).

To ensure that the research results are truly valid and reliable, data validity was tested through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from teachers, students, and documents. Meanwhile, technique triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation (Kawar et al., 2024). Through this process, researchers were able to obtain a complete and accurate picture of the implementation of multicultural-based learning strategies in shaping student character at SMK Tunas Karya Comal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Multicultural Learning Strategies

The research results show that teachers at SMK Tunas Karya Comal have attempted to implement various learning strategies oriented toward multicultural values. These strategies are implemented in a planned manner with the goal of building a learning environment that respects differences, strengthens tolerance, and fosters positive social character in students. In the process, teachers act not only as transmitters of learning materials but also as facilitators, creating an inclusive learning environment.

a. Cross-group discussion

One of the main strategies used is cross-group discussions, where teachers intentionally bring together students from various social, economic, religious, and academic backgrounds. The goal is to foster broader interactions among students and foster the ability to work collaboratively across diverse backgrounds. Through these activities, students learn to respect differing perspectives, listen openly to the opinions of their peers, and present arguments politely and rationally. These discussions also serve as an effective means of developing interpersonal communication skills, empathy, and social awareness. Thus, the learning process is oriented not only toward cognitive achievement but also toward strengthening affective and moral aspects (Zhou & Colomer, 2024).

b. Projects based on national values

The next strategy is implementing projects based on national values, such as community social activities, tolerance campaigns, and mutual cooperation activities. These projects are designed to help students not only understand the concept of nationality theoretically but also apply it in real life. For example, in social activities around the school, students are directly involved in helping the community without regard for differences in religion, ethnicity, or social status. These activities teach the values of solidarity, responsibility, and empathy, while also strengthening awareness of the importance of unity in diversity. Through these direct experiences, students learn that national and humanitarian values are essential components of a multicultural character that must be maintained and developed (Dwi Sogi Sri Redjeki et al., 2025).

c. Integration of character values in vocational practice learning

In the context of vocational schools, practical learning plays a strategic role in shaping students' character. Teachers at SMK Tunas Karya Comal integrate character values into every practical activity, such as teamwork in production, mutual respect for different ideas, and upholding honesty and responsibility in completing assignments. For example, in practical activities in workshops or laboratories, students are divided into heterogeneous groups. In this process, they learn to navigate differences in thinking and unify their perspectives to achieve common goals. Teachers monitor and provide guidance so that each student demonstrates mutual respect, non-dominance, and openness to peer input. Thus, practical activities serve not only as a means of practicing technical skills but also as a medium for learning character and social morals (Rabiman et al., 2023).

d. Contextual learning based on local culture

Another strategy implemented is contextual learning, where teachers connect subject matter to real life and local socio-cultural values. Through this approach, students can understand the relevance of the knowledge they learn to everyday life and appreciate the local wisdom that is part of the nation's identity. For example, in an entrepreneurship lesson, teachers invite students to analyze small business practices in the Comal community that reflect the values of hard work, honesty, and mutual cooperation. Meanwhile, in a Civics lesson, teachers link the material to local traditions such as village deliberations or community social activities that embody the values of tolerance and togetherness. This approach not only enriches students' insights but also fosters a sense of pride in their own culture while respecting the diversity of other cultures (Jubhari et al., 2022).

Overall, the implementation of multicultural learning strategies at SMK Tunas Karya Comal reflects concrete efforts to build inclusive and equitable education. Through a combination of discussion activities, social projects, vocational practice, and contextual learning, teachers have successfully created a learning environment that fosters values of tolerance, empathy, responsibility, and respect for diversity. This strategy also contributes to the development of student character that is not only academically intelligent but also socially and morally mature.

Student Character Development

Research conducted through observations, interviews, and documentation at SMK Tunas Karya Comal shows that the implementation of multicultural learning strategies has a positive impact on student character development. Learning processes designed with diversity principles have been proven to not only improve students' academic understanding but also strengthen social and moral values, which are reflected in daily behavior at school.

Overall, there was an improvement in character across several key aspects: social tolerance and empathy, discipline and responsibility, and independence and open-mindedness. These three aspects are interrelated and serve as indicators of the success of implementing multicultural education in shaping students' personalities with character.

a. Tolerance and Social Empathy

One of the most prominent changes is the increase in tolerance and social empathy among students. Through group work activities and cross-cultural interactions, students learn to respect differences in ethnicity, religion, social status, and economic background. During group discussions, they become accustomed to listening to the differing opinions of their peers without causing conflict and learn to resolve differences wisely (Aramudin Aramudin & R. Hariyani Susanti, 2024).

Furthermore, social projects and tolerance campaigns provide a platform for students to foster empathy for others. For example, through community service activities, students are encouraged to understand the needs of others and actively participate in humanitarian activities. This hands-on experience makes them more sensitive to the social conditions around them and makes them aware of the importance of maintaining harmony in diversity (Takiddin et al., 2025).

Thus, the tolerance and social empathy developed through multicultural learning have helped students understand that every individual has value and dignity that must be respected. These values form an essential foundation for building a peaceful and harmonious social life within the school and community.

b. Discipline and Responsibility

The next aspect that has improved is discipline and responsibility. Multicultural learning emphasizes cooperation and collaboration in every activity, including completing group projects and individual assignments. Students are trained to manage their time, assign roles, and complete assignments according to the specified schedule. This fosters awareness of the importance of discipline in achieving shared goals (Rachmawati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, teachers play an active role in instilling a sense of responsibility by giving students full trust in every learning activity. For example, in entrepreneurship projects or vocational internships, students are given responsibility for designing, implementing, and reporting on the results of their activities. This process teaches that responsibility extends beyond the assigned task to the group and the results of their collaborative work (Martini et al., 2024).

The discipline and responsibility instilled through these learning activities have a significant impact on students' attitudes at school. They become more organized in completing work, respect time, and maintain their commitment to school duties and regulations (None Achadi Budi Santosa et al., 2025).

c. Independence and Open-Mindedness

Observations also show improvements in independence and open-mindedness. Multicultural learning provides ample space for students to think critically and express their opinions freely while still respecting the views of others. Through discussions, presentations, and group reflections, students develop the habit of taking initiative, boldly expressing ideas, and being able to justify their opinions with logical arguments.

This open-mindedness is further developed by teachers implementing a contextual learning approach, where students are encouraged to connect subject matter to the social and cultural realities around them. In this way, they learn to view a problem from multiple perspectives and understand that truth is not singular but can be viewed through multiple perspectives (Herdiansyah et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, independence develops through learning activities that require active participation and individual responsibility, such as preparing project reports or vocational internships. Students learn to make their own decisions, solve problems independently, and not rely entirely on teachers. With this combination of independence and open-mindedness, students at SMK Tunas Karya Comal are able to develop adaptive, critical characters, and are prepared to face social challenges in a multicultural era (Tentama et al., 2019).

Overall, the research results show that multicultural learning strategies have a significant influence on student character development. Through activities that emphasize cooperation, openness, and social responsibility, students become more morally and socially mature. They not only develop academic abilities but also positive attitudes that reflect the values of tolerance, discipline, and independence. Thus, multicultural education at SMK Tunas Karya Comal has significantly contributed to shaping a young generation with strong character, high empathy, and preparedness to live amidst the diversity of Indonesian society.

The Role of Teachers

In the context of implementing multicultural education at SMK Tunas Karya Comal, teachers hold a very strategic position. Teachers function not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as mediators of multicultural values that shape students' character and perspectives on diversity. Through their active role, teachers are crucial agents in fostering an awareness of tolerance, respect for differences, and building an inclusive learning environment.

a. Teachers as Mediators of Multicultural Values

As mediators, teachers play a role in bridging the process of internalizing multicultural values into daily learning activities. In this regard, teachers not only teach subject matter according to the curriculum, but also integrate values such as tolerance, mutual respect, cooperation, and social justice into every learning activity (Dakir Dakir et al., 2022).

For example, during class discussions, teachers consciously guide students to respect differences of opinion, listen openly to each other's arguments, and avoid discriminatory attitudes based on certain backgrounds. Teachers also model how to resolve differences through healthy dialogue, rather than through emotions or superiority (Hariyadi & Rodiyah, 2023).

In addition, teachers use contextual and participatory learning approaches, such as cross-cultural projects or community-based social studies, to help students understand that diversity is not a barrier, but rather a source of strength in living together. In this way, teachers play a crucial role in instilling the understanding that multicultural values are an integral part of Indonesia's national identity and must be preserved (Riyanti et al., 2025).

b. Teachers as Mentors and Facilitators

In multicultural education, teachers act as mentors and facilitators, guiding students to discover the meaning of diversity through direct learning experiences. Teachers not only guide students to understand theoretical concepts of tolerance and justice, but also help them internalize these values through reflection and real-world practice (Supriyanto & Amrin, 2022).

For example, teachers create space for students to engage in dialogue across diverse backgrounds, facilitate social activities in the community, or involve them in interdisciplinary programs that require cooperation and empathy. In this process, teachers provide humanistic

guidance, not commanding, but rather directing, motivating, and instilling moral awareness. In this role, teachers become a bridge between knowledge and real-life experiences. Students not only learn "what tolerance is" conceptually, but also understand "how to be tolerant" in everyday social practice (Natasya & Kembaren, 2025).

c. Teachers as Role Models

In addition to being mediators and facilitators, teachers also serve as role models for multicultural values in the school environment. This role model is crucial because teachers' behavior is directly observed and imitated by students. In this context, teachers are expected to demonstrate inclusiveness, fairness, empathy, and respect for differences in every interaction (Supriyanto & Amrin, 2022).

Observations show that teachers at SMK Tunas Karya Comal consistently demonstrate behavior that reflects a spirit of togetherness and fairness. For example, teachers treat all students equally without discrimination based on family background, academic achievement, or major. In the assessment process, teachers apply objective and transparent standards, so students feel fairly valued.

Furthermore, teachers also provide concrete examples of inclusive behavior. When disagreements arise in class, teachers strive to mediate, calming the situation and guiding students toward a calm, level-headed dialogue. This open and communicative attitude creates a comfortable and democratic learning environment. Thus, teacher role models are a key factor in shaping students' character. Multicultural values cannot be taught simply through theory; they must be demonstrated through teachers' concrete actions in their daily lives.

d. Teachers as Creators of an Inclusive School Climate

Teachers also play a significant role in creating a conducive and inclusive school climate. Through humanistic interactions and an empathetic approach, teachers help build a learning environment free from discrimination, intimidation, and exclusionary attitudes among students (Pandia & Purwanti, 2019).

Teachers collaborate with the school to design activities that incorporate multicultural values, such as cross-cultural national holiday celebrations, collaborative competitions between departments, and cross-class community service activities. These activities strengthen relationships among students and foster a sense of belonging to a diverse school environment. Thus, teachers play a role not only in the classroom but also in building a school culture that supports the values of brotherhood, openness, and social solidarity.

e. Implications of the Teacher's Role in Strengthening Student Character

Through these various roles as mediators, mentors, role models, and creators of an inclusive climate, teachers at Tunas Karya Comal Vocational School have made a real contribution to strengthening student character. The results are evident in students' increased awareness of mutual respect, cooperation, and open-mindedness toward differing perspectives (None Muhamad Rifan, 2025).

Teachers are central figures in instilling multicultural values not only through words, but also through exemplary attitudes and concrete actions. Thus, multicultural learning is not merely a pedagogical approach but also a strategy for developing national character rooted in the values of diversity.

Overall, it can be concluded that the role of teachers is crucial to the successful implementation of multicultural learning strategies at Tunas Karya Comal Vocational School. Teachers are the primary driving force in creating a learning environment that respects differences, fosters empathy, and shapes students' character so they can live harmoniously within social and cultural diversity.

Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Multicultural Learning Strategies

In implementing multicultural-based education at SMK Tunas Karya Comal, several challenges were identified that impacted the effectiveness of implementing diversity values within the school environment. These challenges stemmed from both internal factors (teachers and students) and external factors (availability of learning resources and institutional support). However, the school actively implemented various solutions to overcome these obstacles and ensure the sustainable integration of multicultural values into the educational process.

a. Challenges Faced

1. New Teachers' Lack of Understanding of the Concept of Multicultural Education

One of the main challenges faced is the limited understanding of the concept of multicultural education and its application in learning by some teachers, especially new teachers. Interviews revealed that some teachers still view multicultural education as merely a ceremonial activity or an invitation to live in harmony without understanding its philosophical and pedagogical essence

This limitation impacts the learning process, which does not fully reflect the spirit of diversity. For example, in the teaching and learning process, some teachers are not accustomed to linking subject matter to the diverse socio-cultural contexts of their students, or they do not explicitly instill the value of tolerance in learning activities. As a result, the potential of multicultural education as a means of character development has not been fully utilized.

The main factors contributing to this lack of understanding are the lack of specific training and mentoring related to multicultural education, as well as the lack of easily accessible literature and learning resources for teachers to deepen their understanding of the concept. (Hariyadi & Rodiyah, 2023).

2. Differences in Student Characters from Different Socio-Economic Backgrounds

The next challenge relates to the diverse character of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Tunas Karya Comal Vocational School accommodates students from various regions with varying family incomes, ranging from students from middle- to upper-class families to those living with limited financial means.

These differences in social conditions indirectly influence students' thinking patterns, communication patterns, and learning motivation. In some cases, this can lead to feelings of inferiority, excessive competitiveness, or even misunderstandings in interactions between students. If not managed properly, these differences can create minor social tensions within the school environment, potentially hindering the creation of an inclusive and harmonious learning climate (Rini & Nur Azizah, 2024).

Teachers are required to have the extra skill of understanding each student's background to adapt a fair and nurturing learning approach, without discrimination or bias.

3. Lack of Teaching Materials Containing Multicultural Values

The third challenge is the limited availability of teaching materials that explicitly incorporate multicultural values. Most textbooks used in schools are still cognitively oriented and rarely address cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity within the social context of students (Sarwiji Suwandi et al., 2013).

This forces teachers to take the initiative to independently develop additional materials, for example by linking lesson topics to social issues or local wisdom relevant to multicultural values. However, not all teachers have the time and ability to develop such teaching materials, so the implementation of multicultural education often relies on individual teacher creativity.

This situation demonstrates the need for institutional support from schools in providing systematic learning tools oriented toward diversity values, so that multicultural education can be consistently implemented across all subjects.

b. Solutions Implemented by the School

Recognizing these challenges, the school has taken several strategic steps that have proven effective in strengthening the implementation of multicultural education at SMK Tunas Karya Comal.

1. Teacher Training on Multicultural Education

The first step taken was to hold training and workshops for teachers on the concepts, principles, and strategies for implementing multicultural education in the classroom. This activity aimed to improve teachers' pedagogical competence and professional attitudes in integrating diversity values into learning.

Through this training, teachers gained a new understanding of the importance of respecting differences in students' cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs, as well as how to create an inclusive classroom environment. Furthermore, this training introduced collaborative learning methods that enable students to learn from each other's differences (Pitriani Nasution & Addin Abdillah, 2024).

2. Development of Teaching Materials Based on Diversity Values

The school also took the initiative to develop teaching materials such as Lesson Plans (RPP), modules, and thematic teaching materials that incorporate multicultural values. Within these teaching materials, each subject is directed to incorporate character elements such as tolerance, cooperation, empathy, and justice.

For example, in vocational practical learning, students are assessed not only on technical work results, but also on their attitude of mutual respect for opinions, their ability to work together, and their ethics in completing group assignments. Thus, multicultural values become an integral part of the learning process, not merely an add-on.

This effort is a concrete step in ensuring that multicultural education is truly implemented at the classroom level and can be measured through assessments of student attitudes and behavior (Riyanti & Novitasari, 2021).

3. Cultivating a School Culture that Upholds Tolerance and Mutual Cooperation

Beyond the classroom, schools also strive to establish a school culture consistent with multicultural values. This culture is manifested in various routine activities such as flag ceremonies, joint religious activities, community service, and celebrations of national and regional holidays.

Through these activities, students are trained to respect differences in beliefs, work collaboratively across groups, and foster a spirit of mutual cooperation. Schools also instill positive habits such as greetings, smiling, politeness, and social solidarity, which are part of the moral identity of the school community.

This school culture not only shapes students' character but also serves as a forum for strengthening relationships between members of the school community, including students, teachers, and educational staff, thus creating a harmonious and inclusive educational environment (Indra Rahayu Ningsih, 2024).

c. Implications for Strengthening Multicultural Education

Efforts to address these challenges have had a positive impact on strengthening multicultural education at SMK Tunas Karya Comal. Teachers have become more conceptually and practically prepared to implement diversity-based learning, while students have demonstrated improvements in empathy, tolerance, and social attitudes.

The school's active involvement in developing teaching materials and building an inclusive culture has also strengthened collective awareness that education is not merely a means of transferring knowledge but also a means of developing national character that values diversity.

Thus, despite various challenges, the collaborative efforts between teachers, schools, and students have succeeded in creating a multicultural, equitable, and character-based learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the implementation of multicultural-based learning strategies at SMK Tunas Karya Comal has proven effective in developing tolerant, disciplined, and responsible student character. Through activities such as cross-group discussions, social projects, and contextual learning, students learn to understand and appreciate differences as a natural part of living together. Diversity is no longer seen as a barrier, but rather as a strength that enriches the way we think, interact, and collaborate within the school environment. The success of this strategy is greatly influenced by the active role of teachers, who not only teach but also serve as role models in their attitudes and behaviors. Teachers act as guides and directors of multicultural values, helping students understand the meaning of tolerance, mutual respect, and social justice through concrete examples in everyday life. Teachers' role models are key in fostering students' moral awareness, as students learn more from what they see than from what they hear. In addition to teachers, an inclusive school environment also plays a significant role in supporting the success of multicultural education. SMK Tunas Karya Comal has built a school culture that values differences, fosters a spirit of mutual cooperation, and fosters respectful behavior. Through joint activities such as community service, commemorating national holidays, and social activities, students become accustomed to interacting regardless of social, economic, or cultural background. Overall, multicultural learning strategies have a tangible impact on students' character development. They become more open, empathetic, and able to collaborate with anyone. Values such as tolerance,

responsibility, discipline, and respect are not only understood theoretically but also reflected in daily behavior, both at school and in the community. With consistent implementation, multicultural education is expected to produce a young generation that is intellectually intelligent, emotionally mature, and morally strong. They not only possess academic abilities and vocational skills, but also possess noble morals and a strong social awareness to contribute to creating a peaceful, just, and respectful life amidst diversity.

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