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MULTICULTURAL AND PEACE-THEMED TRADE BOOKS AS IMPETUS FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING: A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION INTO STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering an understanding of multiculturalism and peace education is essential for shaping socially responsible individuals. Schools play a crucial role in equipping students with the knowledge and values needed to appreciate diversity and promote harmonious coexistence. This study investigates the perspectives of secondary school students on multiculturalism and peace education through the lens of trade books, aiming to understand their grasp of multicultural concepts and how they perceive diversity's contribution to peace. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, this research engages eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in Sekayu, South Sumatra, purposefully selected for their diverse urban backgrounds to discuss issues of peace and diversity introduced in their English class through the selection of trade books on these topics. Using semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to share personal narratives that manifested their complex understanding of multiculturalism. The findings reveal a multifaceted perspective: while students acknowledge diversity as a strength that fosters cooperation and mutual support, they are also attuned to the potential conflicts that diversity can incite. This duality encapsulates the critical role of literature in cultivating social cohesion and understanding among students. Moreover, the research emphasizes the necessity for supportive educational practices that assist students in navigating and embracing cultural differences effectively. Ultimately, the study highlights the imperative for educational settings to facilitate constructive dialogues that enhance students' abilities to thrive in a diverse society.
Keywords: *ELT; diversity; multiculturalism; peace education; trade books.*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, the integration of multicultural awareness and peace education into secondary school curricula is becoming essential. As classrooms diversify, the need for students to develop a deep understanding and appreciation for different cultures is underscored by numerous experts. For instance, Habibah et al. (2023) assert that effective global citizenship education focuses on developing an awareness of the cultural diversity and social differences in the world, which involves exposing students to the different cultures, values, languages, and practices that exist in different countries and communities. Further, Haq et al. (2023) argue the significance of multicultural education in Indonesia, emphasizing that "peace, justice, and respect for others" must be fundamental elements in a society characterized by cultural diversity. This sentiment is echoed by (Sun, 2023), who reflects on the expectations placed on educators to incorporate global citizenship education into curricula as a response to globalization's impact on socio-economic and cultural interdependence.

Additionally, Freire's concept of critical pedagogy underscores the need for students to engage in dialogue and reflection, developing a critical consciousness that enables them to challenge systemic inequalities and social injustices (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). This approach aligns well with the urgent need for global

citizenship education, emphasizing learning about cultural differences and generating understanding among diverse communities. Echoing these sentiments, critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of dialogue, reflection, and social action in education (Erbas, 2023). Such approaches advocate for participatory methods that encourage students to reflect critically on their experiences and societal conditions, thus working toward social change and justice. This model aligns closely with current understandings of effective global citizenship education, which must develop awareness of cultural diversity and social differences among students. Additionally, research indicates that embedding peace, justice, and respect within multicultural frameworks reinforces the relevance of peace education in addressing societal conflict (Ilfiandra et al., 2023).

Moreover, Garba (2024) describes the necessity for a global mindset, stating that educational frameworks should aim "to work toward making the world a better place for all through sustainable development goals, reinforcing the idea that educational strategies must adopt a global citizenship perspective. In alignment with this, Mulyana (2024) notes that the management of citizenship education is crucial in addressing multicultural challenges, emphasizing that cultural, ethnic, and religious differences can become sources of conflict if not managed wisely. Thus, the effective management of multiculturalism in educational contexts is essential for nurturing a generation equipped to appreciate and engage with the diverse cultural landscape around them.

Trade books serve a multifaceted role in education, transcending mere literary merit; they act as cultural windows and mirrors through which students can connect with their own identities and explore diverse perspectives. This concept draws heavily on Sims Bishop's metaphor, which underscores the importance of literature in reflecting the lived experiences of readers while also providing insight into unfamiliar lives (Eppley et al., 2023; Brown, 2023). Eppley et al. (2023) describe how inadequacies in literature that neglect to mirror specific cultural identities can lead to a skewed understanding of one's own culture, suggesting that literature not only reflects but also shapes cultural identity. In multicultural societies, where classrooms serve as microcosms of broader societal dynamics, the role of trade literature is especially critical. Research by (Ford & Tyson, 2023) highlights how diverse literature can offer essential narratives that reflect the varied experiences of marginalized groups. This aligns with findings by (Zaino & Conner, 2024) which illustrate how texts that resonate with students' realities empower them to identify both their roles in society and the broader social issues that demand attention. Furthermore, the significant impact of representative literature is documented in multiple studies, wherein students were found to benefit cognitively and emotionally from texts that validate their identities while also challenging them to explore lives and experiences outside their own (Sandip, 2023; Ford, 2024). Moreover, the value of exposing students to multicultural narratives cannot be overstated; trade books provide avenues for discussing vital social themes in educational contexts. The imperative to decolonize literature and incorporate texts that confront racial inequalities is underscored as educators strive to create inclusive learning environments (Ford & Tyson, 2023; Ford, 2024). As highlighted in research by (Mumma, 2024), representation in literature is essential not only for affirming children's identities but also for their understanding of societal structures and narratives. Lastly, the notion that literature empowers readers to envision aspirational roles is further supported by studies showcasing how the stories youth activists read weave dreams of social change and personal agency, ultimately binding together their diverse experiences (Zaino & Conner, 2024; Sandip, 2023).

While previous studies have explored the role of trade books in promoting multicultural awareness and peace education, there remains a gap in understanding how secondary school students themselves perceive these concepts. The current body of literature primarily emphasizes educators' viewpoints, curriculum design, and the theoretical advantages associated with trade books (Prihatiningsih, et.al. 2021). However, there exists a gap in understanding how direct student interactions with these resources impact their perceptions of diversity and peacebuilding. Much of the research has inadequately addressed how students engage with these materials meaningfully or how these interactions shape their views on multiculturalism and conflict resolution, which is crucial for understanding their learning experiences in diverse contexts Collins et al., 2023; Bozan & Boylu, 2025). Enhanced focus on students' perspectives could improve instructional strategies and enrich peace education initiatives (Rifai et al., 2023; Medina et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies have primarily examined multicultural education in broader contexts without

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explicitly linking it to peace education through trade books (Durriyah, et.al. 2024). This study aims to address this gap by investigating students' perspectives on multiculturalism and peace education, providing empirical insights into how trade books shape their understanding and attitudes toward diversity and peaceful coexistence.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating students' perspectives on multiculturalism and peace education, providing empirical insights into how trade books shape their understanding and attitudes toward diversity and peaceful coexistence. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on students' direct engagement with trade books, rather than solely examining teacher or curriculum-based approaches. By exploring how students perceive multiculturalism and whether they see diversity as a contributing factor to peace education, this study provides a unique contribution to the discourse on literature-based peace education.

This study investigates secondary school students' perspectives on multiculturalism and peace education through the lens of trade books. By exploring how students understand the concept of multiculturalism and whether they perceive diversity as a contributing factor to peace education, this research aims to provide insights into the role of literature in fostering inclusivity and social cohesion. The study seeks to answer two key questions: (1) To what extent do students understand the concept of multiculturalism? and (2) Do students consider diversity as a factor that can contribute to peace education?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing narrative inquiry as its methodological framework. According to Bhatt (2023), narrative inquiry serves as a vital instrument for unpacking and articulating the complexities inherent in personal and cultural narratives. This approach enables researchers to gather comprehensive insights into participants' perspectives, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. As elaborated by Chan et al. (2023), narrative inquiry is pivotal in capturing the essence of human experiences. By positioning stories at the core of the research, it allows for an examination of how these narratives shape perceptions and interactions within educational contexts. This emphasis on storytelling not only enriches the qualitative data collected but also facilitates a more profound engagement with the participants' experiences. The qualitative approach is particularly advantageous for investigating students' perspectives on multicultural and peace education. It enables researchers to collect rich, descriptive data within naturalistic settings, thereby reflecting the complexities of students' real-life experiences. Ghanbar et al. (2024) posit that qualitative methodologies, and narrative inquiry in particular, facilitate an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perspectives, which enhances both the reliability and richness of the data obtained. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in the use of narrative inquiry within multicultural contexts. While this method is instrumental in accessing nuanced insights into individuals' experiences, the specific nature of these insights, particularly pertaining to multicultural frameworks, may necessitate further empirical exploration. Syabilla et al. (2024) indicate that not all narrative inquiries are inherently focused on multicultural issues, suggesting a need for targeted studies that explicitly integrate multicultural perspectives into the narrative inquiry framework.

In this study, the sampling criteria focus on eighth-grade students attending a public junior high school in Sekayu, South Sumatra, specifically chosen for their diverse suburban demographic. This selection is both strategic and essential, as it aims to highlight the importance of multicultural perspectives in educational contexts, particularly among adolescents at a critical stage of cognitive and social development. The eighth-grade level aligns with a significant developmental phase for students aged approximately 13 to 14 years. During this time, adolescents typically experience enhanced cognitive abilities that allow them to engage with complex socio-cultural issues, including diversity management and conflict resolution. This aligns with the assertions made by Williams et al. (2023) regarding the necessity of multicultural education as a response to the diverse needs of students in contemporary classrooms. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of multicultural education, empirical studies detailing its impact and effectiveness among adolescents remain limited. The current literature emphasizes a gap in understanding how students' social competencies contribute to their educational experiences and the fostering of inclusive environments (Ghanbar et al., 2024). This study seeks to address these gaps by focusing on a sample population that can provide insights into the dynamics of multicultural interactions within a junior high school setting. Moreover, the

intentional selection of participants from various suburban backgrounds not only enriches the study's findings but also serves to depict a comprehensive picture of the multicultural landscape within educational systems. The variability among participants in terms of ethnicity, family structure, and socio-economic status is expected to yield diverse perspectives on educational experiences and challenges faced in a multicultural environment. Employing a narrative inquiry methodology, as discussed by Ghanbar et al. (2024), allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions concerning multicultural education. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this methodology has not been extensively tested in the specific context of evaluating multicultural education among adolescents. Thus, the proposed study aims to contribute to expanding the methodological framework surrounding this inquiry by investigating how narrative approaches can effectively capture the experiences of students.

Data collection for this study was systematically conducted through semi-structured interviews, each with a duration ranging from 10 to 20 minutes. These interviews were guided by a set of eight carefully crafted questions aimed at eliciting personal narratives and insights regarding the participants' experiences with multicultural issues and peace education. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to probe further into specific areas of interest that emerged during the discussions, thereby enriching the data collected. To ensure the accuracy and fidelity of the data, all interviews were audio-recorded. This facilitated precise transcription and allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the participants' responses. Additionally, ongoing reflections were recorded through a combination of a research journal and supplementary voice recordings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research process and the researcher's evolving perspectives (Kim et al., 2023). The transcription of these semi-structured interviews, coupled with insights from reflective journals, served as a critical methodological tool in conducting thematic analysis. Yolcu and Akçayoğlu (2023) highlight the importance of integrating these reflective practices in qualitative research to enhance the reliability and depth of the resulting analysis. In preparation for the interviews, an instructional session was organized utilizing the trade book, "Who Will Get the Rice Cake?" by Yeisi Gusniati and Singgih Cahyo. This session served as a pedagogical strategy to introduce foundational concepts of multiculturalism and peace education in a contextual manner, effectively establishing a common framework for discussion among participants. By engaging with the narrative within the book, students were encouraged to reflect on the themes of diversity and conflict resolution, thereby enriching their subsequent responses during the interviews.

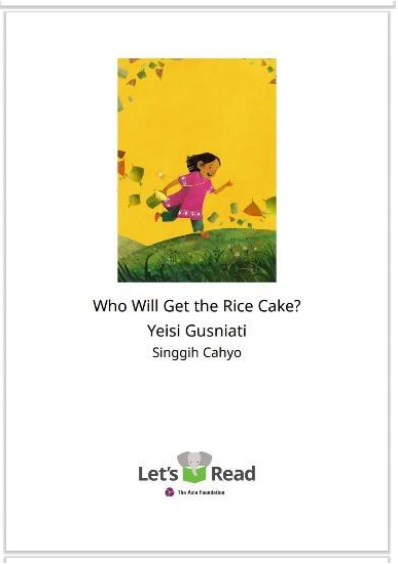


Figure 1. *Trade book*

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to a rigorous analytical process employing holistic coding. This method is particularly beneficial for novice qualitative researchers, as it facilitates an initial broad understanding of thematic data before engaging in more nuanced examinations (Ndwandwe, 2024). Holistic coding, defined as a thematic open coding approach, allows researchers to familiarize themselves with the data on a comprehensive level, thereby enabling the identification of overarching themes while preserving an awareness of the holistic nature of the narratives collected (Weaver et al., 2024). The analytical phase comprised several essential steps. Initially, multiple readings of the transcripts were conducted to immerse the researcher in the participants' narratives fully. This immersion is crucial as it assists the researcher in generating preliminary inductive codes that capture the essence of the themes emerging from the data. Following the initial coding, the themes were critically revised to ensure they adequately reflected the depth and richness of participant experiences while also considering participants' perspectives within the educational landscape. This iterative coding process fosters an interpretive

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understanding that transcends individual stories, connecting them to the broader discourse surrounding peace education and multiculturalism (Jamshaid et al., 2024). By situating individual narratives within this wider context, the analysis not only illuminates specific experiences but also contributes to the existing body of literature on how multicultural education can promote harmony and understanding in diverse educational environments.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, supplementary data sources were employed in addition to structured interviews. These included classroom observations during each of the three learning stages, student reflection journals, teacher notes, and students' written outputs. Observational field notes helped capture real-time engagement and behavioral responses, while student reflections provided insight into emotional and cognitive shifts. These additional sources allowed for data triangulation and a richer understanding of how students internalized multicultural and peace education concepts.

This study strictly adheres to established ethical guidelines to safeguard participant integrity and welfare. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board (IRB) of the affiliated university. All participants and their legal guardians received comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits during the informed consent process. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the assurance that individuals could withdraw at any time without repercussions.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were utilized in all data transcripts and reports, and identifying information was removed from collected data. Audio recordings were securely stored on password-protected devices, accessible solely to the primary researcher. In alignment with ethical standards concerning minors, interviews took place in a safe and familiar school environment with school personnel present to provide additional comfort and security.

The research design also demonstrated sensitivity to participants' cultural and emotional contexts. Narrative interview questions were crafted to minimize potential distress, and the teacher facilitated preparatory instructional sessions to cultivate a respectful and inclusive atmosphere. The researcher remained vigilant for signs of discomfort, ready to pause or terminate the interview as necessary; however, no such incidents occurred. These ethical measures aimed to establish a respectful, safe, and empowering environment for students to articulate their perspectives on multiculturalism and peace education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before conducting interviews to evaluate the extent to which students understand the concept of multiculturalism and view diversity as a contribution to peace education, the teacher implements the use of trade books through three structured and meaningful learning stages. In the first stage, the teacher introduces students to the richness of local cuisine through a lesson about Pempek, a traditional food from South Sumatra, using an interactive PowerPoint presentation as a visual aid. Through narratives about the origins, ingredients, and cultural significance behind Pempek, students are invited to reflect on how food reflects cultural identity and serves as a unifying bridge in diverse communities.

The second stage continues with activities focused on writing short stories themed around multiculturalism and peace education. In this phase, the teacher encourages students to explore the theme of cultural diversity through their imagination, creating characters from different backgrounds and highlighting values such as cooperation, peaceful communication, and conflict resolution. Students express their ideas through writing while embedding symbols of peace, such as sharing food and community activities, within their narratives as a reflection of the importance of cross-cultural understanding.

In the third stage, the teacher guides students to apply the knowledge they have gained through community-based projects. In small groups, students design activities that promote cross-cultural understanding, such as cultural exchange days, art performances, and cooking demonstrations from various traditions. The teacher provides guidance on developing strategies to address potential cultural conflicts and utilize the peaceful communication skills they have learned. Through these three stages of learning, students not only understand the concept of multiculturalism theoretically but also internalize it through direct experiences before they are ultimately interviewed to assess their level of understanding and their views on the role of diversity in building peace.

Based on the structured interview questions, the responses reveal themes related to feeling like an outsider, handling interpersonal conflicts,

understanding cultural differences, and the impact of diversity in educational settings.

Table 1. *Summary of qualitative interview themes*

Theme	Key Points	Representative Quotes
Feeling Like an Outsider	Emotional discomfort, linguistic adjustment, social alienation, eventual adaptation.	I felt sad and strange after moving from Medan to Sekayu (Student 1)
Handling Offense and Conflict	Teasing as social interaction, humor as coping, shifting perceptions through familiarity.	At first, I felt uneasy when my peers teased me, then I realized it was lighthearted (Student 2)
Navigating Language Barriers	Challenges with local dialects, hesitancy in classroom, progressive adaptation through interaction and effort.	The language barrier made it difficult to follow class discussions (Student 3)
Coping with Cultural Differences	Strategies included online learning, asking peers, observation, and repeated exposure.	I used Google and watched how others behaved to understand the culture (Student 1)
Perception of Diversity	Seen both as strength and potential source of conflict; appreciation for inclusivity and collaboration.	I see diversity as a strength. It encourages cooperation (Student 1)
Innovation Through Diversity	Diverse perspectives foster creativity, compromise, and team success in academic and extracurricular settings.	In group activities, we contribute unique ideas that make our projects more creative (Student 1)

Feeling like an outsider

Students described initial feelings of alienation after moving to a new environment. Student 1 shared a sense of emotional detachment, highlighting the absence of familiarity and friends. Linguistic challenges, particularly in understanding different dialects, contributed to discomfort. Over time, however, engagement in school and social settings helped students gradually adapt. Student 3 emphasized the role of participating in class and extracurricular activities in building a sense of belonging.

Handling offense and conflict

Students provided nuanced perspectives on peer teasing. While some initially interpreted it as exclusionary, repeated interactions helped them recognize the underlying humor and social bonding purpose. Student 2's transformation in perspective, from discomfort to acceptance, underscores the adaptability of students in interpreting communication dynamics. Student 4's preference for open dialogue to resolve misunderstandings reflects proactive conflict management strategies.

Navigating language barriers

Language emerged as a significant obstacle, especially when local dialects were used in classrooms or peer interactions. Students reported difficulty understanding lessons and contributing to discussions. Student 3's fear of making mistakes exemplifies the psychological impact of linguistic challenges. Nonetheless, students developed coping strategies, such as asking questions and practicing commonly used phrases, which facilitated better communication and integration.

Coping with cultural differences

To understand and adapt to the local culture, students employed a variety of strategies. Student 1 turned to digital resources and peer observation, while Student 2 emphasized the value of asking questions directly. Student 3's curiosity and proactive approach to making friends helped facilitate cultural adjustment. Repeated exposure to cultural norms through social interaction also played a critical role.

Perceptions of diversity

Most students viewed diversity positively, associating it with opportunities for mutual support, learning, and cooperation. However, Student 2 acknowledged that diversity could also lead to misunderstandings. These perspectives indicate an awareness of the complexity of social dynamics in diverse environments. Diversity was seen as enriching but also requiring communication skills to manage occasional tension.

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Innovation through diversity

Students valued collaboration with peers from different backgrounds, as it brought varied perspectives and creativity to group work. In extracurricular settings, like sports, students appreciated how differing skills and styles complemented one another. Academic discussions also benefited from diverse viewpoints, fostering empathy and problem-solving through respectful dialogue.

Classroom observation

Multicultural education aims to equip students with the competencies necessary for navigating an increasingly diverse society. Central to this endeavor is the fostering of intercultural understanding and tolerance, which are crucial for peace-building initiatives. This study assesses the efficacy of a structured learning framework in enhancing students' multicultural awareness through targeted classroom observations.

Stage one: cultural exploration through visual storytelling

In the initial stage of the learning process, students engaged in a cultural exploration of *Pempek*, a traditional Indonesian dish, using visual storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Observations revealed a pronounced level of student interest and curiosity; many participants exhibited behavioral indicators consistent with engagement—such as nodding and raising questions regarding the historical context of the dish. Furthermore, the integration of interactive visuals allowed students to forge connections between personal food experiences and broader cultural narratives.

A salient aspect of this activity was the establishment of food as a symbolic cultural connector. The teacher's facilitation encouraged students to reflect on their individual cultural identities and collective heritage, thereby activating early cognitive frameworks for understanding cultural interrelations. This foundational engagement is critical as it cultivates an appreciation for diversity, setting the stage for further exploration of multicultural themes.

Stage two: constructing narratives on multiculturalism and peace education

Moving into the second stage, where students authored short stories emphasizing themes of multiculturalism and peace education, observations indicated an evolution toward deeper cognitive engagement. Students actively brainstormed narratives featuring characters from various ethnic backgrounds, fostering discussions around the representation of cooperation and dialogue.

Despite initial challenges encountered by some students in depicting unfamiliar cultures sensitively, peer collaboration significantly mitigated these obstacles. The resulting discourse not only corrected misconceptions but also facilitated the development of empathy. Notably, observations documented a marked increase in collaborative behavior, as students frequently engaged in reciprocal support for vocabulary enhancement, editing, and idea generation.

This stage proved instrumental in transforming abstract notions of peace and diversity into concrete expressions through creative writing, demonstrating a tangible internalization of these principles. The narrative exercise thus acted as a crucial pedagogical mechanism for consolidating students' understanding of intercultural dynamics.

Stage three: community-based project planning

In the final stage, focused on community-based project planning, students exhibited a profound sense of ownership over their learning experiences. High levels of participation and group cohesion were evident as students mobilized for cultural exchange events and collaborative performances. Contributions delineated a rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds, as students shared elements such as songs, dances, recipes, and traditional attire reflective of their heritage.

For instance, one group conceptualized a mock "Unity Festival" incorporating storytelling booths and culinary experiences from various Indonesian provinces. Notably, observers documented instances of students navigating minor conflicts with respect and maturity, employing communication strategies rooted in the peace education principles introduced earlier.

These community-oriented activities not only fostered intercultural collaboration but also provided simulations of real-world conflict resolution and empathy development. The observed transitions from individualistic to collectivist paradigms highlight the efficacy of experiential learning in enhancing student engagement with multicultural themes.

The findings reveal a nuanced and evolving understanding of multiculturalism among students, shaped significantly by personal experiences of relocation, language barriers, interpersonal conflicts, and cultural adaptation.

Understanding multiculturalism through lived experience

Students' understanding of multiculturalism often manifests as an experiential learning process rather than a purely theoretical one. This phenomenon can be attributed to the lived experiences that students encounter as they relocate from varied cultural backgrounds, such as moving from Medan to Sekayu. Through such transitions, students are inevitably exposed to new dialects, customs, and social norms, leading to initial feelings of discomfort and exclusion from their new environments. This observation resonates well with Yüncü and Akgül (2023), who highlight peer support as a crucial factor in facilitating language and social skill development among foreign children, demonstrating how cooperation and shared experiences can mitigate feelings of alienation during adaptation. Moreover, as students navigate these new cultural landscapes, they often find that the process of adjustment is bolstered by forming friendships and engaging in culturally diverse communities, reflecting a journey towards inclusion. This aligns with findings by Chen (2024), who emphasizes that immersive experiences, such as those fostered in adaptable educational environments, enhance students' cross-cultural abilities and cultural sensitivity. Such settings allow for a practical engagement with multicultural dynamics that is imperative for fostering an inclusive educational atmosphere. Additionally, research by Haryati et al. (2024) underscores the vital role education plays in socializing individuals to adapt culturally and maintain communal harmony, which is particularly pertinent for students in transition. It is essential to recognize that students' multi-faceted adaptation processes often evolve over time, shifting from initial discomfort toward integration and belongingness within their new social contexts. This dynamic is somewhat supported by Wu and Qin's findings on the importance of culturally sensitive practices in educational settings; however, their study predominantly focuses on teacher preparation and mindfulness curricula rather than direct student experiences (Wu & Qin, 2025). As students share experiences and mutual support grows, the collective narratives they create further illustrate the implicit understanding of multicultural dynamics, highlighting the importance of adaptation and inclusion as ongoing threads in their educational journeys.

The difficulty many students encounter when adapting to regional dialects and new linguistic environments reveals their acute awareness of the cultural diversity intrinsic to language. Indeed, studies such as those by Harun et al. (2024) highlight the importance of developing multicultural counseling competence among students as they interact with diverse linguistic communities. Specifically, their research affirms that proactive strategies like asking questions and practicing new phrases are essential in enhancing students' self-efficacy and readiness to engage in multicultural environments, ultimately fostering their understanding and respect for cultural-linguistic differences. Moreover, Wong et al. (2023) present an experiential exercise aimed at addressing intercultural communication challenges, emphasizing the significance of valuing differences rather than downplaying them. This approach encourages students to adopt proactive communication strategies, thereby enhancing their functional understanding of multiculturalism. Additionally, the work by Akintayo et al. (2024) underscores the necessity of incorporating linguistic and cultural diversity into educational practices, facilitating students' abilities to navigate multilingual environments effectively. By embracing this diversity, students can develop a more profound appreciation for their peers' language backgrounds. Complementing these insights, Manalu et al. (2024) explore the benefits of integrating a multicultural approach to education, particularly in contexts like history learning, to enrich students' understanding and respect for cultural diversity. These findings align with the broader narrative suggesting that students' active listening and practice are indicative of a growing functional understanding of multiculturalism, exemplifying how they are learning not only to coexist but also to thrive in diverse linguistic environments.

In exploring the various strategies that students utilize to integrate into new cultural environments, it is evident that their approaches—leveraging technology, observing their peers, and asking questions—signify not only their awareness of cultural differences but also their intent to bridge these gaps. Research conducted by Коваленко (2024) indicates that integrating modern educational technologies into educational practices is essential for helping students adapt to diverse cultural contexts, promoting their successful integration and socialization in educational environments. This underscores the role of technology as a tool that facilitates engagement and communication across cultural barriers. Additionally, Latif et al. (2024) argue that educational institutions have a critical

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responsibility in creating supportive environments that empower international students. Their findings suggest that fostering autonomy and self-regulation through active learning strategies significantly enhances students' cultural integration and knowledge sharing. Such environments encourage students to engage proactivity—by interacting with peers and utilizing resources—demonstrating their constructive engagement with multiculturalism. Furthermore, Taufiqurrahman and Nabilah (2023) highlight the importance of structured frameworks within educational settings that support students' interactions and provide avenues for them to seek assistance from their peers, thereby illustrating how school conditions help students navigate and adapt to new cultural landscapes.

Moreover, Chen's study emphasizes that students must actively adopt effective methods for integrating into local contexts, indicating the dynamic nature of their learning strategies in multilingual environments (Chen, 2023). By exploring and employing various approaches, students enhance their academic experiences while demonstrating a commitment to understanding and respecting cultural-linguistic differences. Additionally, Fox-Turnbull's research indicates that student-to-student interactions, particularly through questioning and dialogue, are vital in fostering collaboration and understanding among peers (Fox-Turnbull, 2023). Such interactions not only bolster students' confidence and competence in navigating diverse cultural environments but also reinforce their proactive strategies.

Diversity as a foundation for peace and cooperation

Regarding the second research question, the students' reflections strongly indicate that they perceive diversity as a factor that can enhance peace education, though some challenges persist. The transition in students' perceptions of misunderstandings and teasing illustrates significant growth in emotional resilience and intercultural competence, which are critical components of effective peace education. Initially, such interactions may be perceived as offensive; however, as students gradually come to view these dynamics as a natural part of peer interaction, they demonstrate an essential shift in their engagement with multiculturalism.

In this context, Freire's concept of critical pedagogy underscores the need for students to engage in dialogue and reflection, developing a critical consciousness that enables them to challenge systemic inequalities and social injustices (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). This approach aligns well with the urgent need for global citizenship education, emphasizing learning about cultural differences and generating understanding among diverse communities. Habibah et al. (2023) emphasize that a core component of effective global citizenship education involves developing awareness of cultural diversity, supporting the idea that students must recognize and negotiate cultural differences in their social interactions. Moreover, Zhao et al. (2024) suggest that multicultural experiences foster higher levels of empathy and critical thinking, which are essential for understanding diverse worldviews. This growing empathy enables students to navigate social differences more respectfully, contributing to peaceful coexistence and effective conflict resolution. By choosing humor and engaging in open dialogue rather than taking offense, students illustrate significant personal growth and adaptability in foreign social contexts.

Furthermore, İlvan et al. (2023) highlight the importance of empathy in the educational process, particularly among educators, indicating that understanding multicultural nuances is crucial for developing ethnocultural empathy. Their findings align with the notion that empathy plays a vital role in managing interpersonal conflicts arising from cultural misunderstandings. Additionally, the work of Kalibatseva and Yang supports this by showing that multicultural psychology classes enhance students' intercultural attitudes and empathy. This improvement aids in managing social challenges more effectively (Kalibatseva & Yang, 2024). Such educational frameworks prepare students to engage constructively with peers from varied cultural backgrounds, further reinforcing the significance of communication and empathy in mitigating conflicts.

Students increasingly recognize diversity as a potential catalyst for unity rather than division, illustrating their understanding of the complexities inherent in multicultural interactions. Research by Akun (2023) underscores the importance of culturally responsive teaching, advocating for educational environments that view cultural differences as assets rather than barriers. Such perspectives highlight the role of diversity in fostering cooperation and promoting mutual support, which are essential for building peaceful school communities. Additionally, the study by Aini and Linando (2024) emphasizes the significance of mutual support among colleagues in creating harmonious environments, further

reinforcing the idea that diversity encourages collaboration toward shared objectives. This synergy can be particularly crucial in educational settings where inclusivity is paramount for student success and overall well-being. Furthermore, Galad et al. (2024) discuss the need for flexibility in educational practices to accommodate diverse student populations, noting that recognizing and valuing these differences fosters an inclusive environment. By understanding multiple perspectives, students can develop a mature viewpoint that acknowledges the potential for both unity and misunderstanding within diverse groups. The findings by Massouti et al. (2024) support the notion that inclusive education, which is centered on equity and diversity, empowers students to engage in shared efforts toward a harmonious school environment. Finally, Nawiyah's work on unity in diversity underscores the importance of educational methods that promote collaboration among students, which can lead to stronger communal ties (Nawiyah, 2023). This perspective encapsulates the essence of peace education, where navigating social differences through communication and empathy becomes a shared responsibility among peers.

Collaborative learning in diverse settings has been shown to foster creativity, improved teamwork, and a deeper understanding among students. Engaging with peers from varied backgrounds enhances learning experiences, which aligns closely with recent educational research. For instance, Ekaputra (2024) demonstrates that project-based learning methodologies significantly contribute to students' collaboration and creativity, indicating that such approaches effectively enhance communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills necessary for thriving in diverse environments. This connection underscores the value of collaborative efforts in not only improving academic performance but also in preparing students for more inclusive interactions in the future. Furthermore, the research by Chen et al. (2024) illustrates that interdisciplinary learning environments, characterized by diverse team compositions, are instrumental in enhancing students' teamwork skills and fostering scientific creativity. By exposing students to different perspectives during collaborations, they develop better problem-solving capabilities and adapt more readily to culturally varied contexts. This preparation is essential for students as they navigate more pluralistic environments post-education. In a similar vein, Dincă et al. (2023) note that students engaged in transnational virtual classrooms, which inherently involve cultural diversity, exhibited significant growth in communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. These findings reinforce the idea that collaborative learning experiences enhance individual skills and encourage the negotiation of ideas across cultural lines. Moreover, the study by Muhibbin and Khoirunisa (2023) affirms that students' collaborative skills can improve academic outcomes and contribute positively to their learning experiences, supporting the view that diversity in learning groups sparks cooperation and mutual support among students. Such collaborative learning strategies are crucial in cultivating a peaceful school atmosphere and enabling learners to coexist harmoniously within a multifaceted world.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this examination of students' understanding of multiculturalism reveals a complex yet evolving comprehension of the concept, significantly shaped by their social interactions and emotional experiences within diverse educational environments. Students articulate a nuanced view of diversity, recognizing it as a potential strength that enhances mutual support and cooperation in educational contexts. This perception closely aligns with the literature on peace education, which underscores the importance of diversity in fostering social cohesion and understanding among individuals.

However, students also acknowledge the complexities associated with managing diversity, noting that misunderstandings and potential conflicts can arise within multicultural settings. This dual perspective reflects a mature recognition of the inherent duality of diversity—its capacity to enrich experiences while simultaneously presenting challenges that educators and students must navigate thoughtfully.

To cultivate a more inclusive and effective multicultural educational environment, a series of targeted recommendations grounded in the study's findings and limitations are proposed. First, it is imperative to undertake a critical evaluation of the three-stage learning model, which encompasses cultural introduction, narrative writing, and community-based projects. Future implementations should rigorously assess which stages exert the most substantial impact on student understanding and engagement. In particular, it is essential to identify any disparities in student participation, focusing on differences in enthusiasm, confidence, and depth of reflection

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across the various stages. Second, the role of teacher facilitation merits further investigation; future studies should explore how variations in teacher experience, cultural competence, and instructional style shape students' perceptions of diversity and their capacity to apply peace education principles. Understanding these nuanced dynamics can inform the development of more equitable and effective pedagogical strategies.

Additionally, with regard to research methodology, future efforts must explicitly acknowledge limitations, including the potential for researcher bias in interpreting student narratives, the challenges inherent in cross-cultural meaning-making, and the representativeness of the sample within its specific contextual framework. Transparent addressing of these limitations can enhance the credibility and transferability of research findings. Lastly, the implications of this study should concretely inform policy and institutional practices within educational settings. Educational stakeholders are thus encouraged to implement mandatory multicultural and peace education training for teachers; establish student-led diversity councils to amplify youth voices in shaping inclusive school policies; design structured mentorship programs that pair incoming students from diverse backgrounds with trained peer mentors; and regularly evaluate and refine multicultural curricula through participatory feedback that includes students, educators, and community members.

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