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Integrating Cultural Diversity in Rural Classrooms: Pathways to Inclusive and Democratic Education

Andrew Skourdoumbis

Deakin University, Australia

*Corresponding Author: andrew.skourdoumbis@deakin.edu.au http://doi.org/10.33650/ijess.v3i1.8405

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Abstract:

This study explores integrating cultural diversity and empowering student voices in classroom teaching practices. The aim is to examine how teachers incorporate cultural backgrounds into their lesson plans and classroom activities to foster an inclusive and democratic learning environment. A qualitative research design with a case study approach was employed to gather detailed insights into these practices. Data collection involved interviews with eight teachers and several students, direct classroom observations, and document analysis, including lesson plans and teaching notes. The study reveals that teachers in Indonesia actively integrate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, using socio-cultural themes to create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. Teachers empower students by encouraging them to voice their opinions during discussions and actively participate in decision-making. However, the study also identifies a gap in the consistent application of deliberative democracy principles, with many classrooms still dominated by a teacher-centered approach. The findings suggest that while efforts are being made to create a more inclusive and participatory learning environment, there is a need for further development in fully adopting deliberative democracy in educational practices. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of integrating cultural diversity and fostering student agency to enhance student engagement, motivation, and achievement in education.

Key Words: Research Competencies, Islamic Education Teachers, Mentoring Models, Digital Technology

INTRODUCTION

Education is important in building a just and inclusive society (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Molina Roldán et al., 2021). In a social context, education serves as a means of knowledge transfer as well as a tool for creating equality and opportunity for all individuals, regardless of social or economic background (Craiut et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Zhanbayev et al., 2023). However, access to inclusive education still faces challenges, especially in developing countries like Indonesia. In areas of Probolinggo Regency, there are various obstacles, such as limited infrastructure, educational resources, and educator training. As a result, many students from diverse backgrounds have not received equal learning opportunities. Although inclusive education policies have been proclaimed, their implementation is still not ideal, especially in rural areas that experience gaps in facilities and teaching staff.

Theoretically, the inclusive education approach is based on the theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Lam et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory also explains how environmental factors, such as family, school, and community, contribute to students' learning experiences (Guo & Lee, 2023; Terry, 2021; Tong & An, 2023). Concerning this thinking, inclusive education should be part of a system that supports diversity and ensures equal access to learning (Belser & Prescod, 2021; Vrydagh et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022).

Departing from the observation activities, several problems were found among them. One of the main problems found is teachers' lack of professional training in implementing inclusive teaching strategies. Many teachers still use traditional teaching methods less supportive of students with different learning needs. In addition, the availability of inadequate facilities and infrastructure further exacerbates this condition. The initial observations found that many teachers do not deeply understand the concept of inclusive education and how to apply it in daily teaching practice. This shows that there is still a gap between the inclusive education policy proclaimed and the implementation at the school level.

Previous research has discussed inclusive education but with a different focus. Research by Leijen et al. (2021) discusses the challenges of inclusive education in rural areas and highlights the importance of teacher training to overcome these obstacles. The same thing was also conveyed by Crispel and Kasperski (2021), who examined how inclusive education policies are implemented in various countries and found that many countries still face challenges in practical implementation. Meanwhile, another research examined how student diversity can be managed in the context of inclusive education and emphasized the need for a community-based approach (Hurwitz et al., 2022; Savolainen et al., 2022; Werner et al., 2021).

Although previous studies have discussed inclusive education broadly, no research specifically addresses how teachers in Probolinggo Regency overcome the challenges of inclusive education amid limited resources. Therefore, this study will fill this gap by exploring the inclusive teaching practices that educators have implemented and the obstacles they face. Thus, this study is novel in its more contextual approach to inclusive education in rural areas. Unlike previous research, this study identifies the challenges teachers face and offers concrete strategies to improve the implementation of inclusive education in the Probolinggo Regency. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to developing more effective inclusive education policies in rural areas.

This study aims to analyze teachers' challenges in implementing inclusive education in the Probolinggo Regency, identify teachers' strategies for creating an inclusive learning environment, and provide recommendations to increase teachers' capacity to implement inclusive teaching practices. Through this

research, more applicable solutions can be found to support the implementation of inclusive education in rural areas so that every student gets an equal right to learning without being constrained by their social, cultural, or economic background.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on analyzing classroom teaching practices conducted by teachers in Probolinggo Regency, East Jawa, Indonesia. This location was chosen as the research location due to its unique educational challenges and demographic composition. The region has a diverse cultural background, with a mix of rural and urban areas. The research employs a qualitative design with a case study approach. The case study approach was selected to deeply explore implementing inclusivity principles and student voice empowerment in teaching within the region (Barroga et al., 2023; Loose et al., 2023; Pyo et al., 2023). Through this approach, the researcher can identify and analyze how teachers interact with their students in the context of cultural diversity and how they provide opportunities for students to participate actively in the learning process. The study aims to uncover real-world practices on the ground and the challenges faced in creating an inclusive and democratic learning environment.

The primary sources of information for this study are the teachers who teach at various elementary schools in Probolinggo Regency and the students involved in the classroom learning process. The primary respondents consist of eight teachers selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, such as having more than five years of teaching experience and engaging in teaching practices that integrate cultural diversity. In addition, students who were participants in the lessons were also interviewed to gain their perspectives on their learning experiences that involved cultural content and the empowerment of their voices. Supplementary information was obtained from relevant documentation, such as lesson plans (RPP) and teaching notes. Departing from the respondents who were selected and used as informants in this study are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informant

Informant	Number of Informants	Gender		Background		
Category		Male	Female	High School	Bachelor's	Master's
Public School Principals	4	1	3	0	3	1
Private School Principals	6	0	6	0	4	2
Public School Teachers	11	2	9	0	10	1
Private School Teachers	13	1	12	5	6	2

Data for this study was collected using three primary techniques: interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain their views on integrating cultural diversity and empowering student voices in teaching. Direct classroom observations were made to observe the dynamics of the learning process and interactions between teachers and students. Documentation, such as lesson plans and teaching notes, reinforced the findings obtained through interviews and observations. The collected data was then analyzed through three stages: data reduction, display, and verification. Data reduction involved filtering relevant information and organizing it into key themes. Data display was used to present the findings systematically and clearly, while data verification ensured the accuracy and validity of the findings through triangulation between various data sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Embracing Student Diversity in the Classroom

The data collected shows that accepting student diversity in learning is important in creating an inclusive environment. Cultural diversity-based teaching is done through various activities accommodating students' cultural backgrounds. One approach found is preparing a lesson plan that includes elements of local culture as part of the learning material. This can be seen from the learning process of the Indonesian language subject. Students are tasked with writing an essay about their respective regional cultures. This approach makes it easier for students to connect the studied material with their daily lives. In addition, teachers actively raise topics about local customs, traditions, and values in class discussions. This activity increases students' understanding of their own culture and enriches the learning experience by introducing a broader perspective on the cultural diversity in their environment. In learning interactions, it was found that teachers routinely use various methods to foster an appreciation of local culture in the classroom.

One significant form of integration is the selection of teaching materials relevant to students' cultural context. On several occasions, teachers asked students to share stories about traditional celebrations in their families, which were then used as analysis material in the lesson. This creates a more interactive dialogue space where students receive information and contribute to building shared understanding. In addition, the classroom atmosphere formed from this practice positively affects student engagement, where they feel more valued and listened to. Teachers also use reflection strategies to help students identify the relationship between local culture and academic concepts, for example, in history learning, which is linked to the development of regional culture. The Embracing Student Diversity in the Classroom shows that this approach increases student motivation and reduces feelings of isolation in learning, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Embracing Student Diversity in the Classroom

No	Aspects	Findings	Analysis	Recommendations
1	Cultural Integration in	Teachers include local culture in	Help students connect the material	Strengthen cultural integration in all
	Materials	assignments, such as essays about customs.	with everyday life.	subjects.
2	Learning Methods	Cultural discussions, documentary video projects.	Improve tolerance and communication skills.	Training for teachers for interactive methods.
3	Student Engagement	Student participation increased after being given encouragement.	Students from minority cultures tend to be passive at first.	Use small group discussions to boost student confidence.
4	Teacher's Response	Some teachers are flexible in adjusting learning, some are still rigid.	It is necessary to improve teachers' skills in managing diversity of perspectives.	Technical guidance for teachers in culture-based discussions.
5	Impact on Student Motivation	Students are more enthusiastic when sharing cultural experiences.	Diversity in learning increases curiosity and participation.	Cultural exchange program between classes.
6	Obstacles	Students from dominant cultures are less enthusiastic.	We need more inclusive curriculum support.	Collaboration with local cultural communities

Table 2. show that teachers successfully integrated local culture into learning materials, such as essay assignments on customs, which helped students connect the lesson to everyday life. Learning methods using cultural discussions and documentary video projects also improved students' tolerance and communication skills. However, some students, especially from minority cultures, showed initial passivity in discussions, so it is important to use small group discussions to build their confidence. Some teachers showed flexibility in managing diversity, but some still found it difficult to adjust their teaching methods. Therefore, training for teachers and developing a more inclusive curriculum are needed. To further increase student motivation, it is recommended to have a cultural exchange program between classes and collaboration with local cultural communities.

Based on the data collected, it was found that teachers in Probolinggo have implemented strategies that support cultural diversity in learning, especially by integrating local cultural elements into classroom activities. This approach can be seen from the use of essay writing assignments about local culture, student experience stories in discussions, and teaching materials that reflect their social reality. In addition to increasing the relevance of learning, this strategy also creates a more inclusive learning environment that respects differences. Student participation in these activities shows an increased sense of belonging to their culture and a better understanding of the diversity around them. Thus, integrating diversity in learning is not just a theory but has been applied in teaching practices in Probolinggo to build a broader understanding and appreciation of culture.

Empowering Student Agents and Voices

The study results show that teachers in the classroom actively empower students by allowing them to express their opinions and participate in decision-making in the classroom. Teachers consider students' voices an integral part of the learning process, encouraging them to be more actively engaged in classroom discussions and activities. Teachers successfully increase students' sense of autonomy and involvement in learning by providing space for students to speak, ask questions, and provide opinions. This approach not only strengthens students' confidence but also allows them to develop critical thinking and analytical skills. Through this active participation, students feel valued, enriching their learning experience. Overall, student voice empowerment contributes to forming a more inclusive classroom atmosphere where students have a greater role in their learning process.

This is evidenced by interviews conducted with several teachers during the study. A standard part of them explained that they involve students in class discussions and appreciate their opinions. One of the teachers expressed this: "If their opinion is correct, I agree with them, then I give reinforcement of their understanding (I_F_2023)." Another teacher said, "They usually have different opinions on factual issues... We explain based on their opinion (I_H_2023)." In addition, another teacher's statement also reinforces this, "Teachers must accept criticism from students; If criticism is good, teachers must accept (I_A_2023)." A series of interviews was conducted with several informants to make it easier to interpret the results of the interviews, which were then analyzed as shown in Figure 1.

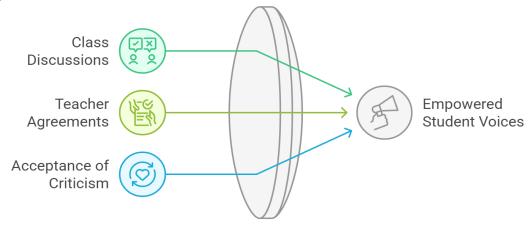


Figure 1. Building a Collaborative Classroom

Departing from the results on Figure 1, it can be understood that most teachers prioritize student involvement in the learning process through class discussions. They appreciate students' opinions and reinforce the understanding that has been expressed, especially when the opinions are relevant and correct. Teachers are also open to differing opinions, especially in discussions about factual issues, and try to explain students' views objectively. In addition, some teachers emphasize the attitude of accepting criticism from students,

emphasizing the importance of teachers accepting constructive criticism. This reflects that the relationship between teachers and students is based on mutual respect, with teachers actively encouraging student participation and strengthening their understanding through open and two-way discussions.

This study shows that teachers actively empower students by allowing them to express their opinions and participate in decision-making in the classroom. Teachers view students' voices as an integral part of the learning process, encouraging them to engage more actively in class discussions and activities. By providing space for students to speak, ask questions, and offer opinions, teachers successfully increase students' sense of autonomy and involvement in learning. This boosts students' confidence and helps them develop critical thinking skills. The findings are supported by interviews with teachers who emphasize the importance of listening to and valuing students' opinions and accepting constructive criticism. This approach creates a more inclusive classroom atmosphere based on mutual respect, where students feel valued and more engaged in learning. It highlights the significance of empowering student voices to foster a democratic and participatory learning environment.

The Application of Deliberative Democracy in the Classroom

The study results show that applying the principles of deliberative democracy in the classroom is minimal. Departing from the research results conducted in several classes, most teachers still use a teacher-centered approach, where students are rarely involved in decision-making. Although some teachers have tried to build dialogue in the classroom, this step has not occurred consistently. It has not fully reflected the principles of deliberative democracy that prioritize equality in participation and decision-making. Much of the learning remains structured in a more traditional format, where the teacher becomes the information center. At the same time, students listen and follow instructions more often than contribute to discussions or planning learning activities. This shows a gap between the theory of deliberative democracy and the practice in the classroom.

The study results indicate that applying the principles of deliberative democracy in the classroom is still very limited. Based on findings from several classes studied, most teachers still use a teacher-centered approach, where students rarely participate in decision-making. Although some teachers have tried to build dialogue in the classroom, this step is not carried out consistently. Learning occurs more traditionally, where the teacher is the information center. Meanwhile, students listen and follow instructions more often than contributing to discussions or planning learning activities. This shows a gap between the theory of deliberative democracy and practice in the classroom, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Classroom Rules

Even so, on certain occasions, some teachers try to provide space for students to share their views, such as when determining task groupings. Teachers who do this report that students become more enthusiastic and more willing to cooperate when they are allowed to voice their opinions. However, opportunities to engage in such decisions are still limited and rare, so classroom interactions remain dominated by a one-way approach, with the teacher as the central controller. Exposure to the data found during the study showed that despite some small efforts to implement the principles of deliberative democracy, most classroom learning is still dominated by a teacher-centered approach. Student involvement in class decision-making remains limited, and the application of deliberative democracy in the classroom context still needs further development. Current practices still do not fully reflect the importance of collaboration, active participation, and consideration of various views that should be the basis of deliberative democracy.

The study results show that the application of deliberative democracy principles in the classroom is still very limited. Most teachers use a teacher-centred approach, in which students are rarely involved in decision-making. Although some teachers try to build dialogue, this has not been done consistently and does not fully reflect the principle of equality in participation and decision-making. Students listen to instructions more often than they contribute to discussions or lesson planning. Although there are some efforts to involve students, such as in determining the division of tasks, their involvement in making class rules and decision-making is still minimal. This shows the gap between the theory of deliberative democracy and the practice that occurs in the classroom. Although there are small initiatives to encourage student participation, the dominance of the teacher-centred approach still hinders the further development of deliberative democracy principles, which should emphasize collaboration and active participation and give diverse views.

Discussion

One of the key findings of this study is the importance of accepting student diversity in classroom teaching practices, particularly in the Probolinggo Regency. The study shows that teachers actively integrate students' cultural backgrounds into lesson plans and classroom activities. This goes beyond merely acknowledging diversity; it is recognized and used as a tool to enrich students' learning experiences. For instance, in Civic Education, students are asked to write essays about their local culture, which helps them connect the lesson content to their daily lives.

Similarly, in Indonesian language classes, students are encouraged to share personal life experiences, which adds a personal and culturally relevant dimension to the learning process. This finding implies creating space for students to feel valued and respected in an inclusive learning environment. By integrating diversity into teaching, students feel more connected to the material, which enhances their motivation and reduces feelings of isolation (Buckley et al., 2023; Froehlich et al., 2023; Hehir et al., 2021).

This finding aligns with previous studies, emphasizing that integrating diversity into the curriculum can increase student engagement in learning (Chien & Hwang, 2022; Heilporn et al., 2021; Wong & Liem, 2022). This is consistent with the results of this study, which indicate that using socio-cultural themes relevant to students' lives helps deepen their understanding of the subject matter (Garzón-Díaz, 2021; Huang & Cheng, 2022; Kpodo et al., 2022). Verbree et al. (2023) highlights that when diversity is accepted and embedded in the learning process, students feel valued and more motivated to participate actively in classroom discussions. Therefore, this research further underscores the importance of embracing diversity to enrich learning, positively impacting academic performance and students' social skills in interacting with peers.

The second significant finding of this study is the empowerment of student voices and participation in learning. Teachers in Probolinggo actively encourage students to express their opinions and participate in decision-making processes within the classroom. Teachers appreciate relevant and correct student opinions and reinforce them to solidify their understanding further. This finding implies the importance of creating space for students to voice their opinions and engage in learning. By involving students in discussions and decision-making, they gain a sense of autonomy in their learning, which improves their confidence and engagement.

This aligns with findings from another Okolie et al. (2022) that empowering students in learning increases their involvement and encourages critical thinking. Yang et al. (2021) also points out that when students can voice their opinions, they feel valued and are more likely to think reflectively and critically about the material being taught. This research underscores the significance of creating a classroom environment that encourages students to be active agents in their learning, ultimately contributing to deeper learning and more critical understanding.

The third significant finding from the study is the limited application of deliberative democracy principles in the classroom. Although some teachers have attempted to incorporate dialogue into their classes, the predominant teaching approach is still teacher-centered, with limited student involvement in decision-making. This finding implies that the gap needs to be addressed when applying the principles of deliberative democracy in classroom settings. This limited engagement shows that, despite efforts to create a more dialogue-based learning environment, the teacher-centered approach continues to dominate, preventing the full development of student involvement in the learning process.

Previous research also highlights the importance of deliberative democracy in education, showing that while there is potential to increase student participation in decision-making, its implementation remains minimal (Larrain et al., 2021; Vrydagh et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022). Deliberative democracy requires broader spaces for student involvement in discussions and decision-making beyond specific topics and involving students in shaping classroom rules and learning policies. Thus, this study emphasizes the need for further efforts to apply deliberative democracy principles more broadly, involving students in discussions and deeper decision-making processes within the classroom.

This study makes a significant original contribution by shedding light on the practical integration of cultural diversity and the empowerment of student voices in classrooms, particularly in Probolinggo Regency. It goes beyond theoretical claims by documenting how teachers actively use students' cultural backgrounds to enrich the learning experience. The research illustrates that diversity is acknowledged and woven into lesson plans and classroom activities, positioning it as an essential tool for fostering a more engaging and inclusive learning environment. By focusing on the active participation of students through culturally relevant content, such as essays on local cultures and personal life experiences, the study challenges traditional approaches that often treat diversity as a peripheral concern in education. Additionally, the study contributes to the literature on student voice by emphasizing the role of teachers in empowering students to express their opinions, thereby enhancing their critical thinking and sense of agency. This finding enriches the understanding of participatory learning and highlights the importance of creating spaces where students can actively shape their learning experiences.

Theoretically, this study expands on existing theories of inclusive education by providing a practical example of how cultural diversity can be integrated meaningfully into the curriculum. It contributes to the theoretical framework of inclusive education by illustrating that diversity, when recognized and actively integrated, can be a powerful tool to enhance student engagement and academic achievement. Moreover, the study enriches the literature on democratic education and deliberative democracy by exploring how teacher-student interactions, although still limited, can evolve to foster greater student

participation in decision-making processes. While the application of deliberative democracy principles remains underdeveloped in the classrooms studied, this research offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the potential benefits of increasing student involvement in classroom governance. By highlighting both the challenges and successes in incorporating student voices, the study invites further exploration into how democratic principles can be more effectively applied to create classrooms that are not only inclusive but also collaborative and participatory.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study underscores the pivotal role of social inclusivity within educational settings by illuminating key aspects such as embracing student diversity, fostering student agency and voice, and establishing deliberative democracy in the classroom. The findings emphasize the significance of curriculum development and teaching strategies that prioritize acknowledging diverse student backgrounds, empowering student participation, and instilling democratic values. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of social inclusivity in education, this research underscores the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that cater to diverse student needs and enable active student engagement, contributing to more equitable and participatory educational practices.

For future research endeavors, it is recommended to delve deeper into the implementation and effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches or interventions to enhance social inclusivity in diverse educational settings. Exploring the impact of targeted teaching strategies on embracing student diversity, empowering student agency and voice, and fostering deliberative democracy within classrooms could provide valuable insights. Additionally, investigating the correlation between inclusive educational practices and academic performance or socio-emotional development could further illuminate the benefits and potential challenges of promoting social inclusivity in education. Moreover, comparative studies across various cultural or regional contexts offer a broader perspective on the applicability and adaptation of inclusive teaching methodologies in diverse educational settings.

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