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# Implementation of Multicultural Education in Primary Schools to Build Intercultural Tolerance: A Case Study on Escola Primaria Timor-Leste

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the implementation of multicultural education at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, Timor-Leste, focusing on the challenges faced by teachers and their impact on students. Using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, this study involved 8 teachers as respondents. The results show that teachers have varying understandings of multicultural education, with the majority only introducing cultural diversity through materials such as folk tales and discussions. The main challenges faced are limited resources and teaching materials that do not cover diversity comprehensively. Nevertheless, the implementation of multicultural education is beginning to show positive impacts, with students becoming more open to cultural differences. These findings indicate the need for a more experience-based approach and the development of more inclusive teaching materials. The implications of this study are the importance of further training for teachers and the provision of resources that support more effective and sustainable multicultural teaching.

**Keywords:**
Case studies, cultural diversity, educational challenges, multicultural education, primary school

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## INTRODUCTION

Multicultural education is a crucial approach in the context of education in Timor-Leste, a country characterized by cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. This diversity has become a social reality that is inseparable from people's lives, so the education system is required to be able to respond to it adaptively and contextually. Timor-Leste's national education vision explicitly recognizes the importance of the linkage between formal education and local culture, as reflected in a policy document that emphasizes the principle of "connection with local culture and ways of life" (Quinn, 2013). In addition, Moruk and Freitas (2025) emphasized that the development of education that is relevant to the socio-cultural context can only be achieved through a collaborative approach between the government, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. In line with these findings, the results of previous research also show the urgency of contextual curriculum development, teacher capacity building, and education policies that explicitly recognize and accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity in Timor-Leste (Ogden, 2017).

The concept of multicultural education at the elementary school level has a strategic role because it serves as the initial foundation in shaping students' attitudes towards diversity. Through multicultural education, students are introduced from an early age to the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and cooperation in a pluralistic society. Darojat and Somantri (2025) emphasized that diversity that is not managed appropriately has the potential to trigger social conflicts. On the contrary, multicultural learning has been proven to help students understand and appreciate individual and cultural differences significantly (Prasetyo et al., 2023). Research by Melindawati et al. (2024) shows that multicultural education programs in schools are able to significantly increase students' tolerance attitudes. Furthermore, Mastur (2023) emphasized that multicultural education needs to be applied systemically and holistically since basic education so that students are used to accepting differences as

part of social life. Elementary school is a very strategic context because it is in the phase of child character formation (Bella et al., 2022), although the effectiveness of character education is highly dependent on the support of teachers and parents (Lestari et al., 2024).

Despite its high urgency, the implementation of multicultural education in primary schools in Timor-Leste still faces various challenges. Learning practices in the classroom show that many teachers have not fully internalized the multicultural approach as a learning paradigm. Language and cultural mediation are often treated as an additional element, rather than a fundamental aspect of the learning process (Quinn, 2013). In addition, some educators still view multicultural education as an additional content, rather than an integral part of the curriculum. The lack of a deep understanding of the urgency of multicultural education among educators and the community is the main obstacle (Quinn, 2022). Efforts to reform the curriculum also face difficulties in accommodating local needs and identities comprehensively (Ximenes, 2025). On the other hand, the cultural diversity in the classroom is often not optimally utilized due to the limitations of contextual teaching materials and the lack of teacher training in implementing multicultural learning effectively (Cabral, 2015).

Various studies related to multicultural education in primary schools have been conducted and show relatively consistent findings. A number of studies confirm that multicultural education contributes positively to increasing tolerance and appreciation of differences among students (Melindawati et al., 2024). Mardhiah et al. (2024) found that school is the most effective environment in developing multicultural competence, as it allows students to interact directly with differences. Maulana et al. (2024) identify the main implementation strategies for multicultural education which include the integration of values in the curriculum, teacher examples, and experiential learning. In addition, a learning model that integrates cultural diversity through diverse teaching materials has been proven to have a significant influence on strengthening students' multiculturalism (Komalasari et al., 2018). These findings show that multicultural education has great potential to enrich students' insights and attitudes towards diversity.

However, there are still a number of research gaps that need further attention. Multicultural education in primary schools often does not touch on the practical and contextual aspects of the cultural diversity that students experience on a daily basis. The limitations of experiential-based teaching materials and low teachers' awareness of the importance of learning approaches that depart from students' real experiences are the main obstacles (Quinn, 2022). In addition, multicultural education still tends to be positioned as a complement to the curriculum, not as the core of the learning process (Quinn, 2013). Support for adequate learning facilities, including media that represent cultural diversity and a conducive learning environment, is also relatively limited, particularly in primary schools in rural areas of Timor-Leste.

Based on these conditions, this study offers a different approach by emphasizing the implementation of multicultural education based on students' hands-on experience. The novelty of this research lies in the effort to explore learning practices that creatively integrate the diversity of local cultures in daily learning activities, not just as conceptual material. By engaging students in real-life experiences that reflect cross-cultural interactions in the school and community environment, this approach is expected to strengthen the internalization of the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and cooperation. Through the exploration of the implementation of multicultural education at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, this study aims to analyze the challenges faced, the effectiveness of the learning practices applied, and provide contextual recommendations for teachers and schools. Thus, this research is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to the development of multicultural education in Timor-Leste, especially at the primary school level.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Multicultural Education in the Context of Basic Education

Multicultural education is an educational approach that aims to accommodate and respond to the diversity of cultural, linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds of students in the learning process (Azzahrawi, 2023; Hanum et al., 2025). In the context of basic education, multicultural education has a strategic role because it is the initial foundation for the formation of children's attitudes, values, and mindset towards differences (Prasetyo et al., 2023). Safita and Suryana (2022) specifically emphasizes early childhood as the most appropriate period to develop character and implement multicultural

education. Education at this stage not only functions as a knowledge transfer, but also as a means of forming students' character and social identity (Suradi et al., 2022). Therefore, the integration of multicultural values in learning from primary school is seen as a preventive measure to minimize the potential for future social conflicts.

Studies have shown that multicultural education in primary schools contributes to the development of tolerance, empathy, and respect for individual and group differences. Prasetyo et al. (2023) emphasized that multicultural learning helps students understand diverse social realities and build mutual respect in daily interactions. The results of the research of Melindawati et al. (2024) also confirm that a multicultural education program that is systematically designed is able to significantly increase students' tolerance attitudes. These findings reinforce the view that multicultural education is not just an additional content, but an essential element in basic education.

### Multicultural Education and the Establishment of Intercultural Tolerance

Intercultural tolerance is one of the main goals of multicultural education. Tolerance is not only interpreted as an attitude of accepting differences, but also includes the ability to understand, appreciate, and cooperate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of a multicultural society such as Timor-Leste, strengthening intercultural tolerance is an urgent need given the diversity of ethnicities, languages and traditions that coexist in a single social space.

Mastur (2023) emphasized that multicultural education needs to be implemented holistically and sustainably so that the value of tolerance can be deeply internalized in students. This process becomes more effective when multicultural education is integrated with character education, so that learning focuses not only on cognitive aspects, but also affective and social aspects. Research by Bella et al. (2022) shows that elementary school age is a critical phase in character formation, including attitudes towards diversity. Therefore, multicultural education applied at this level has the potential to have a long-term impact on students' social attitudes in the future.

However, the success of multicultural education in building intercultural tolerance is greatly influenced by the role of teachers and the family environment. Lestari et al. (2024) emphasized that the support of teachers and parents is a key factor in building the moral foundation and social attitudes of children. Without the active involvement of educators and families, the multicultural values taught in schools are at risk of not being optimally internalized in students' daily lives.

### Implementation of Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

The implementation of multicultural education in elementary schools includes various strategies, ranging from the integration of multicultural values in the curriculum, the use of teaching materials that represent diversity, to the application of learning methods that encourage cross-cultural interaction. Maulana et al. (2024) identified that the main strategies for implementing multicultural education include curriculum integration, teacher examples, and experiential learning. This approach allows students to learn directly through social interaction and reflection on real experiences.

Learning models that integrate cultural diversity through various contextual sources and activities have also proven effective in strengthening students' multiculturalism. Komalasari et al. (2018) show that the use of culturally diverse learning materials has a significant effect on students' multicultural understanding and attitudes. This emphasizes the importance of learning that is not only text-oriented, but also on the experiences and social realities of students.

In the context of Timor-Leste, the implementation of multicultural education faces more complex challenges. Quinn (2013) note that language and culture mediation in the classroom is often still positioned as an additional element, rather than an integral part of the learning process. In addition, curriculum reform still has difficulties in accommodating local identities and needs as a whole (Ximenes, 2025). The limitation of contextual teaching materials and the lack of teacher training are also major obstacles to the effective implementation of multicultural education (Cabral, 2015).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of multicultural education in a primary school context. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate

because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena in their real-life settings, particularly how multicultural values are enacted in everyday teaching practices (Putri et al., 2025; Rohartati et al., 2024; Yin, 2018). The study focused on teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies for fostering intercultural tolerance through multicultural education.

The research was conducted at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, in the Beloi region of Timor-Leste. This school was deliberately selected for its high level of cultural diversity, with students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Such a context provides a rich and relevant setting for examining how multicultural education is implemented and how intercultural tolerance is cultivated at the primary school level.

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of eight primary school teachers from Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. The selection criteria included: (1) teachers who actively taught in classrooms with culturally diverse students, and (2) teachers who had direct experience in integrating multicultural values into their teaching practices.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had rich, relevant information about the implementation of multicultural education. By involving teachers who routinely interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, the study captured in-depth perspectives on pedagogical approaches and classroom dynamics. These perspectives provided valuable insights into the challenges of fostering intercultural tolerance in primary education.

**Instrument and Data Collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guidelines as the primary research instrument. The interview instrument was designed to explore teachers' understanding of multicultural education and the teaching strategies they use to promote intercultural tolerance. Furthermore, the interviews revealed challenges faced in culturally diverse classrooms and the perceived impact of these practices on students' attitudes and behaviors.

The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature on multicultural education and intercultural tolerance in primary education. To ensure the instrument's validity, content validation was conducted through expert judgment by two experts in educational research and multicultural studies. Feedback from the experts was used to revise the wording, clarity, and relevance of the interview questions. The instrument underwent one revision until it was deemed valid and suitable for data collection.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to provide flexibility in exploring emerging issues while maintaining a consistent framework across participants. This format allowed teachers to articulate their experiences and perspectives in depth. At the same time, it ensured that all core themes related to the research objectives were systematically examined.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis in this study followed four main stages: data presentation, data reduction, interpretation, and conclusion drawing (Meiliati et al., 2025; Miles et al., 2014). During the data presentation stage, interview transcripts were systematically organized to facilitate an initial understanding of teachers' responses to the implementation of multicultural education and intercultural tolerance. This structured presentation served as a foundation for subsequent stages of analysis.

During the data reduction stage, relevant information was selected, coded, and simplified in accordance with the research objectives. Irrelevant or repetitive data were excluded, while meaningful statements were grouped into categories reflecting key aspects of multicultural education practices, challenges, and outcomes. In the interpretation stage, the categorized data were synthesized into a coherent narrative that highlighted patterns and relationships among teachers' experiences and perspectives. Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, the findings were analyzed to identify overarching themes and to draw conclusions on the effectiveness and challenges of implementing multicultural education to foster intercultural tolerance. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied by cross-checking information across participants' responses.

# RESULTS

This study aims to explore the implementation of multicultural education in a primary school context, specifically at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, Timor-Leste. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eight teachers, the findings illuminate how multicultural education is understood, enacted, and experienced in daily classroom practices. The results also reveal a range of challenges that shape its implementation, as well as teachers' perceptions of its influence on students' attitudes and interactions. To provide a comprehensive and systematic account, the findings are organized thematically, reflecting the interconnected dimensions of understanding, practice, constraints, and perceived outcomes of multicultural education in this school setting.

## Teachers' Understanding of Multicultural Education

An important focus of this study was to examine how teachers conceptualize multicultural education within their professional practice. Interview data indicate that teachers generally acknowledge the importance of cultural diversity in primary education, particularly in a school environment characterized by students from varied ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. However, their interpretations of what multicultural education entails differ in scope and depth. For some teachers, multicultural education is primarily associated with introducing students to visible cultural differences, such as ethnicity, language, customs, and traditions.

Several teachers described multicultural education as an effort to familiarize students with the diversity that exists around them, often through basic knowledge-sharing activities. This understanding reflects a descriptive orientation, where cultural diversity is presented as information to be learned rather than as values to be internalized. As one teacher noted, multicultural education involves teaching students about differences in ethnicity, language, and traditions, while acknowledging that such efforts have not yet been optimally implemented in classroom practice *(Teacher A)*. Another teacher similarly emphasized cultural exposure through stories and songs but highlighted the absence of structured guidance or training to support deeper implementation *(Teacher D)*.

Alongside this descriptive understanding, other teachers articulated a more value-oriented perspective, viewing multicultural education as a means of cultivating tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding among students. These teachers emphasized the importance of guiding students to appreciate differences and to interact respectfully with peers from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, even among teachers who expressed this broader understanding, translating these values into consistent instructional practices remained challenging. As reflected in the interview data, there is a noticeable gap between teachers' conceptual understanding of multicultural education and their ability to systematically integrate its principles into daily teaching activities. In many cases, multicultural content is introduced episodically rather than embedded as an integral component of the curriculum and classroom culture.

## Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Education

Teachers identified multiple challenges that affect the implementation of multicultural education in their school context. One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles concerns the limited availability of teaching materials that adequately represent cultural diversity. Many teachers reported that existing textbooks and instructional resources focus largely on general historical or civic topics, with minimal attention given to the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of Timor-Leste. As a result, teachers often rely on their own initiative to supplement lessons with additional materials, which can be difficult given time constraints and limited access to resources.

The lack of specialized training also emerged as a significant challenge. Several teachers expressed uncertainty about how to teach multicultural topics effectively, particularly when addressing sensitive issues related to cultural differences and social attitudes. Without formal professional development opportunities focused on multicultural education, teachers tend to draw on personal experience rather than pedagogical frameworks, which may limit the depth and consistency of implementation across classrooms.

Beyond school-level factors, teachers also highlighted the influence of broader social and community contexts. Persistent cultural stereotypes within the surrounding community were described as shaping students' pre-existing attitudes toward certain ethnic or cultural groups. According to teachers, these stereotypes sometimes manifest in classroom interactions, affecting how students relate

to peers from different backgrounds. One teacher explained that negative stereotypes ingrained in students' everyday environments pose a challenge to fostering more inclusive attitudes at school *(Teacher E)*. These accounts illustrate that the implementation of multicultural education is not confined to instructional practices alone but is also shaped by societal norms and beliefs that students bring into the classroom.

**Teaching Methods Used by Teachers**

In terms of instructional strategies, teachers reported using a range of methods to introduce multicultural content in their classrooms. Folklore, regional songs, and classroom discussions were the most commonly mentioned approaches. Folklore, in particular, was perceived as an effective medium for engaging students, as it allows cultural themes to be presented in narrative forms that are accessible and relatable for young learners. Through stories and songs from different regions or ethnic groups, teachers seek to familiarize students with cultural diversity in ways that align with students' developmental levels.

Classroom discussions about customs, traditions, and everyday cultural practices also feature prominently in teachers' instructional repertoires. These discussions provide opportunities for students to share their own cultural experiences and learn about their peers'. Teachers noted that such activities can encourage curiosity and openness, especially when students are invited to talk about their family traditions or local customs.

Despite these efforts, teachers acknowledged that the instructional methods employed remain largely theoretical and informative. Opportunities for students to engage in direct or experiential learning related to cultural diversity are limited. One teacher observed that although folklore is frequently used to introduce different cultures, students are rarely involved in activities that promote direct interaction or collaboration across cultural groups *(Teacher C)*. Another teacher pointed out the need for more practical and hands-on activities that would allow students to experience multicultural values in action rather than merely learning about them conceptually *(Teacher H).* These reflections suggest that while current methods support initial awareness of diversity, they offer limited scope for deeper experiential engagement.

**The Impact of the Implementation of Multicultural Education on Students**

Teachers generally perceived the implementation of multicultural education as having a positive influence on students' understanding of cultural diversity. According to the interview data, students have become more aware of differences among their peers and more open to learning about cultures other than their own. Teachers observed increased curiosity and interest when multicultural content was introduced, particularly through stories and discussions that highlight cultural traditions and practices.

In addition to cognitive awareness, teachers reported gradual changes in students' social interactions. Some students were described as becoming more tolerant and respectful toward peers from different cultural backgrounds. However, these changes were often characterized as subtle and incremental. Teachers noted that while students show increased openness, they still tend to form closer social bonds with peers from similar cultural or ethnic groups. One teacher remarked that although students are beginning to show interest in other tribes, a more significant attitudinal change will take time *(Teacher F)*. Another teacher similarly observed that students appear more accepting but continue to gravitate toward familiar cultural groups *(Teacher G)*.

These observations highlight the complexity of influencing social attitudes through school-based interventions alone. Multicultural education contributes to students' growing awareness and tolerance, and transforming deeply rooted social preferences and interaction patterns is a gradual process. Teachers' accounts suggest that sustained exposure to multicultural values and consistent reinforcement across learning contexts are necessary to support more meaningful and lasting change. Table 1 summarizes key results on teachers' understanding of multicultural education, the challenges in its implementation, the instructional methods used, and the perceived impacts on students.

As reflected in Table 1, the findings portray a multifaceted picture of multicultural education at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi. Teachers demonstrate varying levels of understanding, ranging from descriptive awareness of cultural diversity to broader value-oriented perspectives. Both internal school factors, such as limited resources and training, and external social influences, including community-

based stereotypes, shape implementation. Instructional practices rely heavily on folklore, songs, and discussions, which support students' initial awareness but offer limited experiential engagement. At the student level, teachers observe increased openness and tolerance, alongside persistent tendencies toward culturally homogeneous peer interactions. Together, these results provide insight into the current state of multicultural education in the school and the contextual factors that shape its practice.

**Table 1. Summary of Findings**

| Aspects | Findings |
|---|---|
| Teachers' Understanding of Multicultural Education | Teachers show varying levels of understanding. Most view multicultural education as an introduction to diversity, with limited integration into daily practice. |
| Challenges in Implementing | Limited teaching materials on cultural diversity and the persistence of cultural stereotypes in the community. |
| Teaching Methods Used | Use of folklore, regional songs, and discussions; approaches remain largely informative with minimal hands-on experience. |
| Impact on Students | Increased understanding and tolerance toward diversity, but attitude changes remain limited in the short term, with students tending to associate with their own cultural groups. |

## DISCUSSION

Multicultural education at the primary school level plays a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes toward diversity, particularly in culturally heterogeneous societies. The findings of this study, conducted at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, Timor-Leste, demonstrate that while teachers generally recognize the importance of multicultural education, its implementation remains uneven and constrained by several contextual factors. These findings align with previous research suggesting that teachers' conceptual awareness of multicultural education does not automatically translate into effective classroom practice (Grant et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2024). In this context, multicultural education is often understood as cultural exposure rather than as a transformative pedagogical approach aimed at fostering intercultural competence and social cohesion.

The variation in teachers' understanding of multicultural education reflects broader challenges identified in the literature. Many teachers in this study interpreted multicultural education primarily as the introduction of students to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. This descriptive orientation is consistent with findings from previous studies indicating that multicultural education is often reduced to cultural content rather than embedded as a value-based, reflective practice (Pochkhanawala & Ogodo, 2024). While such an approach can raise students' awareness of diversity, it may not sufficiently address issues of power, identity, and social relationships that are central to developing intercultural tolerance (Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Vavrus, 2017). Teachers' limited emphasis on these deeper dimensions suggests a need for clearer pedagogical frameworks that position multicultural education as an integral component of character education rather than as supplementary content.

One of the most significant challenges identified in this study concerns the limited availability of culturally responsive teaching materials. Teachers reported that existing textbooks and learning resources inadequately represent the cultural diversity of Timor-Leste, focusing instead on general historical narratives. This finding echoes previous research, which has highlighted that curriculum materials often fail to reflect local cultural realities, thereby limiting students' opportunities to see their own identities and experiences represented in formal education (Hu et al., 2019; Numan & Ayaz, 2023). The absence of locally grounded multicultural resources may also lead teachers to rely on generic instructional strategies, thereby constraining students' depth of engagement with cultural diversity (Ogletree, 2012).

In response to these limitations, teachers in this study frequently employed folklore, regional songs, and classroom discussions as alternative instructional strategies. These methods are widely recognized as effective entry points for introducing cultural diversity in primary education, particularly when working with young learners (Amani & Mgaiwa, 2025; Hamilton & Murphy, 2024). Storytelling and music can foster emotional engagement and provide culturally meaningful contexts for learning.

However, the findings indicate that these approaches remain largely informative and symbolic, offering limited opportunities for students to negotiate cultural differences through lived experience actively. This finding aligns with research suggesting that while cultural narratives are valuable, they must be complemented by experiential and dialogical learning to promote deeper intercultural understanding (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018).

The lack of experiential learning opportunities emerged as a critical limitation in the implementation of multicultural education at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi. Teachers acknowledged that students rarely engage in activities that involve direct intercultural interaction, such as collaborative projects, role-playing, or community-based learning. Experiential learning has been widely recognized as essential for fostering intercultural competence, as it allows students to apply knowledge, reflect on their assumptions, and develop empathy through interaction (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Without such opportunities, multicultural education risks remaining at a cognitive level, with limited impact on students' social behaviors and relationships.

Beyond instructional and resource-related constraints, this study highlights the influence of broader social and community contexts on the effectiveness of multicultural education. Teachers reported that cultural stereotypes prevalent in the surrounding community shape students' initial attitudes toward peers from different cultural backgrounds. This finding is consistent with ecological perspectives on education, which emphasize that schools operate within broader social systems that influence students' beliefs and behaviors (Burns, 2015). In such contexts, schools alone cannot be expected to counter deeply ingrained societal prejudices fully. Nevertheless, sustained and intentional multicultural practices within schools can serve as an important counterbalance, providing students with alternative narratives and experiences that challenge stereotypical views (David-Izvernar & Roman, 2023).

Despite these challenges, teachers perceived positive, albeit gradual, changes in students' understanding of and openness to cultural diversity. Students were described as becoming more curious about other cultures and more respectful toward peers from different backgrounds. These observations align with previous studies indicating that even limited exposure to multicultural content can increase awareness and tolerance among primary school students (Bellini et al., 2016; Geerlings et al., 2019). However, the persistence of culturally homogeneous peer groups suggests that cognitive awareness alone may not be sufficient to transform social interaction patterns. Social identity theory suggests that individuals, including children, tend to gravitate toward in-group members, particularly when structured opportunities for positive intergroup contact are absent (Chalik & Dunham, 2020; Chen et al., 2018).

The findings of this study, therefore, underscore the importance of sustained, school-wide approaches to multicultural education. Rather than treating multicultural content as isolated lessons or activities, teachers and schools need to integrate multicultural values across subjects, routines, and social interactions. Professional development for teachers is particularly critical in this regard. Research has shown that targeted training can enhance teachers' confidence and competence in addressing cultural diversity, enabling them to move beyond surface-level approaches toward more transformative practices (Mengxue et al., 2025; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2024). Such training should emphasize reflective practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, and strategies for facilitating dialogue and collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that developing culturally responsive teaching materials tailored to Timor-Leste's local context is essential. Locally grounded resources can help bridge the gap between national curricula and students' lived experiences, making multicultural education more relevant and meaningful (Leton et al., 2025; Quinn, 2022). Incorporating community knowledge, local histories, and everyday cultural practices into learning materials may also strengthen connections between school and community, thereby reinforcing the values promoted in the classroom (Correia et al., 2025).

Overall, the discussion of these findings highlights that multicultural education at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi is characterized by genuine commitment on the part of teachers, alongside structural and contextual constraints that limit its transformative potential. The gradual changes observed in students' attitudes suggest that multicultural education is a long-term process that requires consistency, institutional support, and alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and social context. By addressing these interconnected factors, schools can move toward more effective and sustainable approaches to fostering intercultural tolerance in primary education.

# CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of multicultural education in a primary school setting at Escola Primaria 05 de Beloi, Timor-Leste, focusing on teachers' understanding, instructional practices, and perceived impacts on students. The findings indicate that teachers generally recognize the importance of multicultural education in promoting tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. However, their understanding is predominantly descriptive, with multicultural education often interpreted as the introduction of cultural differences rather than as a transformative approach embedded in daily pedagogical practice. Consequently, the integration of multicultural values into classroom instruction remains inconsistent and largely limited to surface-level activities.

The study further reveals that both pedagogical and contextual challenges shape the implementation of multicultural education. Limited availability of culturally responsive teaching materials and insufficient professional training constrain teachers' ability to implement multicultural education more comprehensively. Although teachers employ instructional strategies such as folklore, songs, and classroom discussions to introduce cultural diversity, these methods remain largely informative and provide limited opportunities for experiential learning. At the same time, broader social influences, including persistent cultural stereotypes within the surrounding community, continue to shape students' attitudes and interactions, resulting in gradual rather than immediate changes in intercultural relations among students.

These findings carry important implications for educational practice and policy. Multicultural education should be positioned as an integral component of the primary school curriculum, supported by sustained professional development that enables teachers to move beyond surface-level cultural exposure toward more reflective and experiential pedagogical approaches. The development of culturally responsive teaching materials grounded in Timor-Leste's local context is also essential to enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of multicultural education. Furthermore, schools should create structured opportunities for experiential and collaborative learning that facilitate meaningful intercultural interaction, thereby strengthening the long-term impact of multicultural education on students' social attitudes and behaviors.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single primary school with a limited number of teacher participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. In addition, the qualitative case study approach focused primarily on teachers' perspectives, without incorporating classroom observations or students' voices. Future research is therefore encouraged to involve multiple schools, adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, and include perspectives from students and other stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation and impact of multicultural education in primary schools.

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**Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use**

During the manuscript preparation process, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to support writing quality improvement. Specifically, ChatGPT version 5.1 was used to improve the clarity, coherence, and readability of the text, while Grammarly was used to assist with grammatical and linguistic error correction. The use of AI tools was strictly limited to language editing and writing refinement. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors to ensure accuracy, originality, and minimize potential bias. The authors are solely responsible for the content of this manuscript.

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