Toward a Transformative Multicultural Pedagogy: The Role of Cultural Empathy in University

Andri Fransiskus Gultom [1*] (iD)

[1] Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, Indonesia
* Author Correspondence

Abstract

In the context of increasing global diversity, universities are challenged to implement educational paradigms that not only acknowledge cultural plurality but also foster meaningful intercultural understanding. This research offers a novel contribution to the field by articulating cultural empathy not merely as an affective disposition but as a transformative pedagogical praxis with structural implications. While existing literature often treats multiculturalism as a policy framework, this study investigates its operationalization through the lens of empathy-based engagement within a university setting. Utilizing a qualitative approach at Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, data were analyzed through the Miles and Huberman interactive model. Findings reveal that multicultural education is integrated through a shared ethos of human dignity, formal curriculum embedding, and institutionalized policy commitments. Furthermore, five dimensions of empathy-based pedagogy emerge: content integration, collaborative knowledge construction, experiential prejudice reduction, equitable educational relationships, and cultural empowerment through embodied expressions like culinary arts and dance. By shifting the paradigm from surface-level diversity management to deep intercultural competency, these results provide a replicable framework for global higher education institutions. Ultimately, the study advocates for reorienting multicultural pedagogy toward transformative frameworks that institutionalize empathy as a critical competency for social justice.

Introduction

The current landscape of global technological advancement necessitates that nations and international organizations embrace multiculturalism, which encompasses a wide array of ideologies, religions, and ethnicities (Eliyahu-Levi, 2020; Surahman, et al., 2022). As a prominent multicultural nation, Indonesia possesses an extensive wealth of socio-cultural diversity that defines its national identity. This inherent pluralism is clearly reflected in the diverse religious, ethnic, and racial groups that coexist within the country. Given this complex social fabric, there is a profound need for multicultural education to be effectively implemented for all citizens. Such educational initiatives are particularly vital for the younger generation to ensure that diversity does not devolve into social friction or communal conflict. Ideally, as a republic, Indonesia should provide a welcoming space for all forms of difference. This aspiration is rooted in the original consensus of the founding fathers, who sought to establish a state dedicated to peace and the collective welfare (Lloyd, & Hannikainen, 2022; Thaha, Ropi, & Umam, 2024).

In the framework of republicanism, freedom is defined as an equal social status where every citizen is empowered and recognized under the rule of law. This conceptualization of political equality is essential for fostering a stable society and preventing the emergence of domination or social discord (Pettit, 1993). However, the current social reality in Indonesia often stands in stark contrast to these democratic ideals regarding the acceptance of cultural and religious diversity. Historical instances, such as the conflicts in Sampit and Poso, as well as various acts of intolerance during religious holidays, highlight the persistent challenges of managing pluralism. Intergroup tensions frequently arise when differences in core values and identities lead to friction within the community (Zamroni, 2001; Yaqin, 2005). These social disruptions often permeate educational settings, affecting the interactions and relationships among students. Consequently, universities must develop robust policies, specifically through the strategic implementation of multicultural education, to address these recurring conflicts (Williams-Gualandi, 2020; Gultom, 2024).

Multicultural education within social science is fundamentally situated as a critical branch of the sociology of education. This field primarily examines the intricate social interactions and community relations that define the educational experience. These interactions encompass the entire pedagogical process, including the curriculum content, the roles of educators, and the specific environments where learning occurs. Implementing multicultural education serves as a proactive strategy to mitigate conflict, as social tensions have shifted from occasional phenomena to daily realities (Wirawan, 2012; Wihardit, 2010). Therefore, national education authorities must prioritize multiculturalism in their policy frameworks to serve as an instrument for social and national stability. At its core, this educational movement seeks to reform institutional structures to provide equitable academic opportunities for all students, regardless of their gender, race, or language. Furthermore, it aims to resolve cultural disputes and foster a sense of shared identity through the development of student empathy (Fani, & Akhtar, 2024).

Research indicates that diverse student populations require inclusive educational environments that offer equal opportunities regardless of their socio-cultural backgrounds or identities. Classroom diversity serves as a practical manifestation of multiculturalism within the broader education system (Ramadhani, Marini and Maksum, 2021). Schools essentially function as microcosms of society, bringing together individuals from a vast array of cultural heritage. In this context, students are more likely to achieve academic success when they are equipped to navigate a globalized world as appreciative citizens of diversity. Evidence suggests that the success of multicultural initiatives depends more on the quality of interpersonal relationships than on formal policy models alone. An education system that fails to acknowledge its inherent structural challenges is prone to implementing superficial solutions that are unsustainable in the long term. Ultimately, modern social cohesion requires a form of democratic pluralism that ensures the full participation of minority voices within a shared constitutional framework (Maboudi, 2020; Trantidis, 2024).

The results of research from Yılmaz (2016) entitled "Multiculturalism and Multicultural Education: A Case Study of Teacher Candidates Perceptions" states that students who are diverse or adopt a multicultural mentality should be provided with schools or educational environments that have equal opportunities regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, cultural background, socio-cultural status, and sexual orientation. The diversity of elements in the classroom is a manifestation of the implementation of multicultural education at every level of education and in the education system in general. Schools can be a miniature of life in a small-scale society because schools are institutions where individuals from different cultures gather. It can be said in this context that student achievement will increase if they can become global citizens who can appreciate diversity.

The results of research (Ozturgut, 2011) entitled "Understanding Multicultural Education" found that the solution to the challenges in building multicultural education lies in understanding the relationship between individuals in the implementation of multicultural education rather than policy models or educational reforms in the education system. An education system, which does not realize its problems and challenges as they are, will create superficial challenges and solutions, bound to fail in the long run. Keddie (2014) in his research entitled "Australian Multicultural Policy Social Cohesion Through a Political Conception of Autonomy" argues that multicultural policy focuses more on autonomy and political difference (rather than recognition and cultural identity). The requirement for social cohesion, unity, and equality in the current era is democratic pluralism that supports the full participation of minority groups in a broad civic domain where the shared constitution reflects the ideology and values of multiple voices (majority and minority).

As for the theoretical framework for this research: first, multicultural education. Multicultural education is closely related to the development of the character of Indonesian citizens as members of a pluralistic and multicultural society in a democratic and responsible order. In this way, the following things will be instilled in students: (1) close relationships with fellow students who have diverse sociocultural backgrounds; (2) student empathy is done by observing the attitudes, views, feelings and perceptions of other students with different socio-

cultural background; (3) a sense of respect and appreciation for diverse cultural values and interests as national wealth whose preservation must be preserved.

Tobroni, (2007) states that multicultural education is education that provides opportunities for all students regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, religion and culture. Even though this definition is very simple, multicultural education must be given meaning and be in accordance with the function of national education. Every student must have the same opportunity to develop his or her potential. Prepare each student to participate competently in an intercultural society. The broad definition of multicultural includes experiences that shape general perceptions of age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, type of cultural identity, language, race and special needs (Sutarno, 2007).

The second, the social theory of multicultural education. The social theory of multicultural education from James Banks is a theories that aim to understand and overcome social injustice and culture in education. This theory is based on the idea that education should promote cultural pluralism and encourage students to develop a better understanding of their culture own and other people's cultures (Banks, 1993). James Banks' social theory of multicultural education is a theory that aims to understand and overcome social and cultural injustice in education. This theory is based on the idea that education should promote cultural pluralism and encourage students to develop a better understanding of their own culture and the cultures of others (Banks, 1993). Banks argues that multicultural education should include three main components: first, students' cultural experiences, knowledge of the culture, and skills for living in a diverse society.

The third, cultural empathy. Cultural empathy is a concept within social science that involves understanding and appreciating the perspectives, emotions, and experiences of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Empathy refers to the ability to vicariously experience and understand the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others. Cultural empathy extends this understanding to consider the unique cultural context in which individuals live. It involves recognizing that people from different cultures may perceive the world differently, have distinct values, norms, and communication styles. There five dimension of cultural empathy: content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, pedagogical equality, empowering campus culture and social structure

The empathy-based multicultural learning model is expected to be able to provide an atmosphere of empathy for differences in background between one group and another so that researchers can call this model the empathy learning model. Rockwell, et.al's research shows that for many instructors, empathy is central to sociological thinking (Rockwell et al., 2019). This is contrary to the opinion of (Ozturgut, 2011) who believes that the solution to the challenges in building multicultural education lies in understanding relationships between individuals rather than implementing policy models or educational reforms in the education system.

The research objective is to critically examine the praxis of multicultural education through the lens of cultural empathy, recognizing that universities increasingly function as complex arenas for negotiating identity, equity, and intercultural interaction (Banks & Banks, 2021). The objective emphasizes cultural empathy not merely as an emotional disposition, but

as a pedagogical tool for cultivating ethical and affective engagement in multicultural learning environments (Samuels, et,al., 2017; Gkonou & Mercer, 2022). Centered at Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, the research objective also entails analyzing how institutional norms, classroom practices, and policy frameworks co-construct the student experience of diversity and inclusion (Setyowati & Adi, 2023). Ultimately, the research objective aligns with global educational priorities that promote empathy-informed approaches to decolonizing pedagogy and transforming structural asymmetries in higher education (Shields, 2010; Zembylas, 2020).

Method

This research employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the operationalization of multicultural pedagogy at Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang. Rather than focusing solely on policy descriptions, the procedural framework focused on the lived experiences of academic stakeholders and the structural factors influencing pedagogical implementation. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 15 key informants who represent the university's structural and academic hierarchy. These included the Rector and Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs (to provide insights into institutional policy), 5 senior lecturers from diverse faculty backgrounds, and 8 students representing different ethnic origins (e.g., East Nusa Tenggara, Papua, and Java) to capture a breadth of intercultural experiences. Data Collection Procedures Data were gathered over a six-month period (January to June 2023) through three primary channels: (1) in-depth interviews: semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocol focused on three thematic axes: (a) conceptual understanding of cultural empathy, (b) integration of multicultural values in the classroom, and (c) perceptions of institutional support. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; (2) participatory observation: the researcher engaged in 120 hours of participatory observation. This included attending faculty meetings, observing classroom interactions in "General Education" courses, and participating in extracurricular cultural festivals to witness the manifestation of cultural empathy in real-time; (3) document analysis: Strategic documents, including the University's Strategic Plan (Renstra), course syllabi (RPS), and campus diversity regulations, were analyzed to triangulate verbal accounts with formal institutional mandates. Data analysis and trustworthiness following the Miles and Huberman (1984) interactive model, data were processed through four concurrent flows: data collection, data condensation (coding specific empathy-related behaviors), data display (thematic mapping), and conclusion drawing. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation (comparing student vs. lecturer perspectives) and member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations.

Results and Discussion
Results

The research findings begin by elaborating on the conceptualization of multiculturalism within the specific context of a higher education environment. Initial empirical data suggest

that the principle of multiculturalism serves as a fundamental cornerstone for the university's identity. In a general sense, almost any institution of higher learning can claim a multicultural status if the criterion is simply the presence of diverse academic members. This inherent diversity typically encompasses a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, races, and geographic origins. However, this broad demographic reality presents a challenge when attempting to define what makes multiculturalism a unique core value of a specific institution. Without a more nuanced distinction, the term risks becoming a generic descriptor rather than a specialized institutional mission. Consequently, the study seeks to move beyond surface-level demographics to uncover the deeper, distinctive integration of these values within the university structure.

> In an interview, Rector stated,
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> "The institutionalization of the university's multicultural identity was formally initiated in 2008, a strategic vision proposed during the Rector's previous tenure as a director. This initiative was fundamentally driven by the unique demographic reality of Malang, which serves as a significant socio-cultural melting pot characterized by a vast array of ethnic groups and religious backgrounds. Recognizing that the academic community, comprising both faculty and students represented such diverse origins, the leadership identified a critical necessity to establish a unified framework for multiculturalism. Consequently, this policy aims to move beyond mere demographic presence by creating an inclusive academic environment where individuals from disparate cultural and religious paths can engage in collective study and harmonious intellectual exchange. By integrating these values into the university's core mission, the institution seeks to transform diversity from a social condition into a deliberate pedagogical strength."

The verbatim above describes that the historical initiation of the university as a multicultural campus in 2008 reflects a visionary leadership response to the profound socio-cultural diversity inherent in the Malang region. This institutional commitment is not merely a policy adjustment but a deliberate effort to harmonize the various ethnic and religious identities of both faculty and students into a unified academic community. By fostering an environment where individuals from disparate backgrounds can engage in collective study, the university lays the essential groundwork for developing deep-rooted cultural empathy. This empathetic engagement allows the academic community to transcend superficial tolerance, moving toward a transformative pedagogy that values human dignity above all differences. Within this framework, multiculturalism serves as the structural foundation, while empathy acts as the relational bridge that ensures meaningful interaction among diverse groups. Ultimately, the integration of these values demonstrates how a university can function as a microcosm of a pluralistic society, dedicated to the pursuit of both intellectual and social harmony.

Multiculturalism campus concepts are the ideas and practices that aim to foster diversity, inclusion, and equity in higher education institutions. They involve understanding the multiple and intersecting identities of students, faculty, and staff, as well as the historical and contemporary contexts of oppression and privilege that shape their experiences. Multiculturalism campus concepts also include developing the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to create a more inclusive and respectful campus environment for all members of the community (Doucette, Sanabria, Sheplak, & Aydin, 2021; Addy, Dube, Mitchell, & SoRelle, 2023).

Some examples of multiculturalism campus concepts are: the first, competency models. These are frameworks that describe the dimensions and levels of multicultural competence for various roles and functions in higher education, such as student affairs professionals, faculty, administrators, and students. Competency models can help assess the current state of multiculturalism on campus and guide the development of learning outcomes, curricula, programs, and policies that promote multiculturalism. The second, oppression theory. This is a perspective that analyzes the systemic and structural causes of inequality and injustice in society, based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and nationality. Oppression theory can help identify the sources and effects of discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization on campus, and inform the strategies and actions to challenge and transform them (Punti, & Dingel, 2021; Lantz, Pieterse, & Taylor, 2020).

The third, environmental theory. This is an approach that examines the physical, social, and psychological aspects of the campus climate and culture, and how they influence the sense of belonging, satisfaction, and success of different groups of students, faculty, and staff. Environmental theory can help evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the campus environment in terms of diversity and inclusion, and suggest ways to improve it (Watt, 2023).

The fourth, intersectionality. This is a concept that recognizes the complexity and interconnection of multiple and overlapping social identities, and how they shape the experiences of oppression and privilege in different contexts. Intersectionality can help acknowledge the diversity and uniqueness of each individual and group on campus, and avoid the assumptions and stereotypes that result from a single-identity or identity-exclusive approach.

The second set of empirical findings highlights that multicultural education is actively evolving through diverse institutional practices. In an interview, the Vice-Rector explained,

> "while multiculturalism began as a standalone course, it has since been integrated into a broader Kanjuruhan Identity subject that includes anti-corruption values. Beyond the formal curriculum, the university leadership actively encourages faculty members to move past theoretical teaching by fostering inclusive social interactions. This strategy is implemented by requiring diverse student groupings in collaborative assignments, community service (KKN), and teaching internships (PPL). Ultimately, these efforts ensure that multiculturalism is experienced as a lived institutional culture rather than being limited to a two-credit academic requirement."

Berikut adalah deskripsi akademik dalam satu paragraf yang terdiri dari enam kalimat koheren, yang mensintesis implementasi praktis pendidikan multikultural tersebut: The second set of empirical findings demonstrates that multicultural education has undergone a significant evolutionary process, transitioning from a standalone elective into a core institutional identity. By integrating these values into the "Kanjuruhan Identity" curriculum, the university ensures that multiculturalism and anti-corruption principles are formally embedded within the students' academic foundation. This pedagogical shift is further strengthened by a leadership mandate that encourages faculty to move beyond theoretical instruction toward active, experiential learning. Through the strategic formation of diverse student groups in community service (KKN) and teaching internships (PPL), the institution fosters authentic cross-cultural

engagement. Such a comprehensive approach ensures that diversity is not merely studied as a conceptual framework but is lived through daily collaborative practices. Ultimately, this systematic integration reflects a commitment to developing cultural empathy by bridging the gap between formal policy and practical social interaction.

The essence of the informant's statement is the importance of multicultural education at universities which can be done in various ways, such as: providing special courses on multiculturalism, encouraging lecturers to form study groups, assignments, KKN and PPL consisting of students from various ethnic groups and backgrounds. In addition, there are efforts to create a conducive learning environment for students from various cultural backgrounds.

The third empirical data reveals that multicultural education based on cultural empathy. Basically, what is meant by the dimensions in this research refers more to the meaning thought by James Banks (2019) in his book entitled "Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives". "Dimensions," writes Banks, "as major areas or aspects that contribute to the development and implementation of a multicultural educational framework." This dimension is very important to create and become an indicator for the realization of multicultural education with an inclusive learning environment that recognizes and celebrates the diversity of cultural backgrounds, experiences and identities of students.

Each dimension discusses specific aspects that can be used as indicators of the implementation of multicultural education and play an important role in promoting equality, empathy and social justice in educational settings. There are five implementation dimensions: (1) content integration; (2) knowledge construction process; (3) prejudice reduction; (4) justice pedagogy; (5) empowering school (or campus) culture and social structures (Banks, & Banks, 2019).

The first dimension: content integration. The dimension of content integration in efforts to implement multicultural education at the higher education level is a very important one. The integration of content in learning for students who come from various cultural backgrounds encourages the realization of multicultural education in its most tangible form, namely the relationship between lecturers and students in the learning process and is included in the existing curriculum at the university.

Kurniawati is a woman lecturer. She said,

"Beyond formal coursework, the university implements multicultural education through a variety of experiential and extracurricular initiatives. These activities include vibrant cultural festivals and parades that provide a platform for students to showcase and celebrate their diverse heritage. Furthermore, the institution promotes intellectual engagement by organizing cross-cultural dialogues and specialized academic studies that extend beyond the traditional classroom setting. Such a multifaceted approach ensures that multiculturalism is integrated into the broader campus life, fostering a deeper sense of community through shared social and cultural experiences."

The analysis for this statement are: firstly, the statement acknowledges the diversity of the student population and the need for multicultural education to address it. It also recognizes that multicultural education is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather a dynamic and responsive process that can take different forms and methods depending on the situation and

the objectives. Secondly, The statement assumes that multicultural education is beneficial for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds and identities. It also implies that multicultural education can foster intercultural communication, understanding, and collaboration among students, as well as enhance their academic and personal development. Thirdly, the statement does not specify the criteria or standards for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of multicultural education, nor does it address the potential challenges and limitations of implementing it in different settings. It also does not mention the role and responsibility of the faculty and staff in facilitating and supporting multicultural education, or the expectations and feedback from the students themselves. This is a multicultural acceptance in higher education (Rubin, 2018).

The second dimension: knowledge construction process. Research findings on the knowledge construction process is a complex and layered process involving various 150 stakeholders at the university, including policy makers, lecturers, and students. Policy makers at universities play an important role in shaping the environment supports multicultural education.

This process of knowledge construction is not limited to the classroom just. Cultural activities on campus, such as celebratory events different cultural heritage or panel discussions on social issues contemporary, also provides opportunities for community members universities to learn from each other and expand understanding them about the world. In the context of research interview results, findings this can provide valuable insight into how the process works knowledge construction occurs in universities and how education multiculturalism can be improved. By listening to these sounds, we can learn more about the challenges and opportunities that exist in multicultural education, as well as effective strategies for promote inclusion and diversity on campus.

Ninik Indawati, a lecturer who teaches multicultural forms of education in learning. She said, "what supports multicultural education is that it is contained in material packaged in a Kanjuruhan Identity Education course, so that students take that course." Lecturers can also use teaching methods in the course text, namely Kanjuruhan Identity Education, which allows students to relate the subject matter to their own experiences and context. This may involve group discussions, research-based projects, or reflective assignments that encourage students to think critically about multicultural issues. Apart from that, lecturers can create a classroom environment that is inclusive and values diversity. This can involve the use of inclusive language and practices, as well creating a space for students to share and celebrate their identity and culture. In terms of policy, universities can encourage multicultural education through the development of inclusive curricula. This could involve integrating multicultural content into all disciplines, as well as providing training for faculty on how to teach in ways that respect and validate student diversity. Universities can also support multicultural education through cultural activities (Ames, Berman, & Casteel, 2018).

The third dimension: prejudice reduction. Prejudice reduction is an important aspect of multicultural education. Prejudice can hinder understanding and collaboration between individuals from different backgrounds, and therefore, it is important to reduce prejudice in the university environment. First, to reduce prejudice between students with different backgrounds, universities can implement various strategies. One way is through anti-prejudice

education, which involves teaching about prejudice and discrimination, as well as ways to combat them (Banks & Banks, 2004; Alanay, & Aydin, 2016).

In the university context, prejudice reduction efforts can involves two aspects: cognitive (what is thought) and practice (which done). Students at universities can make efforts This is based on findings from interview and observation research. First, cognitive effort involves a change in manner think and understand others. This can involve learning about other people's cultures and traditions, reflecting on personal prejudices and biases, and strive to see the world from other people's perspectives.

> An interview with Sholeh, a university student, said:
> The participant acknowledged a newfound awareness of personal biases previously held toward individuals from specific cultural backgrounds. To address these preconceptions, a deliberate effort was made to engage deeply with the complexities of those cultures and adopt their unique perspectives. This shift in cognitive and emotional orientation has led to a more profound appreciation for the inherent value of human diversity. Ultimately, this process of self-reflection and active learning served as a catalyst for significantly mitigating internal prejudices."

This testimonial illustrates the transformative power of cultural empathy, where the recognition of one's own limitations becomes the starting point for pedagogical growth. By consciously choosing to see the world through the lens of the "Other," the individual moves beyond mere tolerance toward a state of genuine intellectual and social recognition. This internal shift demonstrates that multiculturalism is most effective when it transcends structural policy and enters the realm of personal ethical development. Such a process highlights the role of affective pedagogy in dismantling deep-seated stereotypes that often hinder social cohesion within a pluralistic society. Consequently, the narrative serves as empirical evidence that fostering empathetic engagement is essential for creating an inclusive and psychologically safe academic environment.

The fourth dimension: pedagogical equality. The implementation of pedagogical equality in the context of multicultural education at universities involves various aspects, including cognitive efforts by university leaders, practices carried out by lecturers in the classroom, and the form of pedagogical equality curriculum. These efforts can be made based on findings from interview and observation research. First, cognitive efforts by university leaders. University leadership plays a critical role in creating an environment that supports pedagogical equity. They are responsible for developing a vision and mission that reflects the values of equality and inclusion, as well as creating policies and programs that support the vision and mission.

As a result of the interview, university leaders stated, "we are committed to creating an inclusive and equal learning environment. We believe that every student, regardless of their cultural background, should have equal access to quality education." The results of these interviews demonstrate the university leadership's commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment. They believe that every student, regardless of cultural background they, should have equal access to quality education. This means that universities strive to ensure that all students, no matter where they come from or what their cultural background, are given the same opportunities to learn and develop. This includes everything

from from access to learning resources, opportunities to participate in class activities, to fair and equal treatment from teaching staff.

The fifth dimension: empowering campus culture and social structure . Implementation of multicultural education in the context of empowering campus culture and social structure involves various aspects, including cultural empathy efforts in ideas and in practices carried out by lecturers in class, and the form of curriculum or assignments in class. Likewise, the practices carried out by university students and students have become campus culture (Zhang, & Noels, 2023).

The cultivation of a campus culture that facilitates dialogue through the medium of traditional culinary heritage serves as a sophisticated strategy for fostering intercultural understanding and empathy. As an intrinsic component of cultural identity, food provides a unique gateway into the historical narratives, traditions, and core values of diverse social groups. For instance, institutionalizing communal meals where students share authentic dishes from their respective backgrounds functions as an effective catalyst for meaningful intercultural engagement. This approach transforms a simple social gathering into a deliberative space where the appreciation of diversity is both tangible and accessible. By leveraging the sensory and social nature of food, universities can create low-stakes environments that encourage students to navigate cultural differences with curiosity rather than apprehension.

The documentation from this research illustrates that the university's culture operationalizes cultural empathy by utilizing regional culinary delights as a foundational point of connection. In practice, these culinary exchanges serve as an introductory "opening dish" that initiates deeper conversations regarding the distinctiveness of various regional identities. The empirical data highlights a clear three-stage process recognition, conversation, and comprehension that occurs when students interact with diverse food traditions. This progression allows students to move beyond surface-level observation toward a profound sense of empathy as they literally and figuratively taste the variety of the human experience. Ultimately, the transition from tasting to understanding demonstrates how culinary diversity can bridge psychological gaps and solidify a collective sense of belonging within a pluralistic academic community.

Figure 1. Multicultural education based on cultural empathy through culinary

Beyond the sensory experience of tasting diverse cuisines, these events provide students with a significant opportunity to engage with the historical narratives and cultural symbolism inherent in culinary traditions. Such engagement facilitates a deeper intellectual appreciation for the intricate complexities of various global cultures, moving beyond surface-level observation toward a more profound social understanding. This link between culinary practices and multicultural education is empirically supported by Kraff and Jernsand (2022), who argue that food-centered events serve as powerful platforms for intercultural exchange. Their research suggests that these gatherings can effectively consolidate concepts of cultural diversity while simultaneously identifying and deconstructing the barriers that hinder inclusive social environments. By situating food as a medium for learning, universities can transform traditional social gatherings into transformative pedagogical spaces.

While culinary events act as a catalyst for dismantling prejudice-filled narratives, they also necessitate a critical awareness of the risks associated with cultural exotification. Kraff and Jernsand (2022) caution that without careful facilitation, such diversity can be misperceived as a mere commodity or "exotic" experience curated for the consumption of the ethnic majority. To mitigate this risk, it is essential to frame culinary diversity through the lens of genuine empathy and mutual respect, rather than superficial entertainment. This perspective is further reinforced by the research of Sommer, Rush, and Ingene (2011), who identify culinary heritage as a potent symbol of multiculturalism when grounded in an empathetic framework. Ultimately, when integrated thoughtfully, the shared experience of dining becomes a vehicle for fostering authentic human connections and reinforcing a sustainable model of democratic pluralism.

Figure 2. Multicultural Education education based on cultural empathy through dances

Beyond culinary engagement, the integration of performing arts, specifically through traditional singing and dancing, serves as a potent instrument for fostering intercultural understanding within the university environment. These artistic expressions act as profound mediums of cultural identity, offering students intimate insights into the core values and historical narratives of diverse groups. By actively observing or participating in these performances, students move beyond a purely cognitive understanding of diversity toward an affective appreciation of the aesthetic and social uniqueness of different cultures. This

experiential approach is consistent with recent findings by Zembylas (2020), who argues that transformative pedagogy must move beyond the "psychologization" of empathy toward a practice that emphasizes shared human dignity and social recognition. Such communal artistic experiences provide the necessary emotional bridge for students to transcend their own cultural boundaries and develop a genuine sense of global citizenship.

While celebratory events like cultural parades are highly effective, their long-term impact is contingent upon a broader, systemic commitment to multicultural education. The success of these initiatives depends on a multi-layered institutional framework, including the development of a curriculum that authentically reflects diversity and specialized training for faculty to master inclusive pedagogical techniques. This structural alignment ensures that the campus remains a safe and welcoming environment where all students, regardless of their background, feel fundamentally valued. This necessity is echoed by Zamroni et al. (2021), whose research highlights that cross-cultural competence in educational settings requires a deliberate synergy between formal policy and daily social interactions. Ultimately, without a robust institutional foundation that supports these experiential activities, multicultural efforts risk remaining superficial rather than becoming a sustainable component of the university's mission

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of multicultural pedagogy at Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang transcends mere theoretical discourse, evolving into a deeply rooted institutional praxis. The transition from structural integration, manifested in the university's vision and mission to pedagogical enactment through "Cultural Empathy" suggests that the institution has moved beyond "surface-level multiculturalism." By employing the five dimensions of empathy-based pedagogy, the university facilitates a transformative environment where knowledge is not merely transferred but collaboratively constructed through dialogical engagement. This coherent integration confirms that when cultural empathy is institutionalized, it functions as a cognitive and experiential bridge, reducing prejudice and fostering equitable educational relationships that are essential for a diverse academic community.

In comparison to existing literature, these results both align with and extend the dimensions of multicultural education proposed by Banks (2019). While previous studies, such as those by Yılmaz (2016) and Zamroni et al. (2021), emphasize the importance of teacher candidates' perceptions and cross-cultural competence in high school settings, this research highlights a unique collegiate model where "embodied expressions" like culinary traditions and dance serve as vital pedagogical tools. Unlike the findings of Zembylas (2020), which warn against the "psychologization" of empathy as a purely internal state, this study provides empirical evidence that cultural empathy can be operationalized as a structural and visible component of campus life, effectively bridging the gap between individual affect and institutional policy.

The primary novelty of this research lies in its conceptualization of cultural empathy not merely as a psychological disposition, but as a "Transformative Pedagogical Praxis." While much of the contemporary scholarship on Indonesian multiculturalism focuses on conflict resolution or national identity (e.g., Suparlan, 2002; Yaqin, 2005), this study offers a granular analysis of

how empathy-based pedagogy specifically empowers students from marginalized regions, such as NTT and Papua, within a dominant Javanese cultural context. By articulating a framework where empathy serves as a critical competency for structural inclusion, this study contributes a scalable model for higher education institutions globally that seek to transition from passive tolerance to active, transformative intercultural engagement.

There is a shifting from affective disposition to pedagogical praxis. The conceptualization of cultural empathy as a "Transformative Pedagogical Praxis" marks a significant departure from traditional psychological frameworks that view empathy merely as an individual emotional response. In this study, empathy is redefined as a deliberate and structured educational activity that actively dismantles the hierarchical barriers between dominant and marginalized cultural identities. By moving beyond the passive acknowledgment of diversity, this praxis necessitates an institutionalized commitment where empathy becomes a core competency embedded within the learning process itself. This shift aligns with recent scholarship by Zembylas (2020), who argues that for multicultural education to be truly transformative, it must move away from the simple "psychologization" of feelings toward a robust pedagogy of social recognition. Thus, the novelty lies in transforming empathy from a private virtue into a public, educational instrument for social justice.

A critical dimension of this research's novelty is its granular focus on the power dynamics between students from regions such as NTT and Papua and the dominant Javanese cultural environment. While previous Indonesian scholarship has largely focused on national stability or religious tolerance, this study investigates the specific mechanisms of empowerment through empathy-based engagement. It illustrates how an empathetic pedagogical framework allows students from minority backgrounds to assert their cultural agency rather than assimilating into the majority norm. According to Zamroni et al. (2021), fostering cross-cultural competence requires a synergy between formal policy and the daily social realities of students. By prioritizing the voices of those on the periphery, this research provides a concrete model for how universities can facilitate "structural inclusion," ensuring that diversity leads to genuine equity rather than mere numerical representation.

Finally, the research offers a scalable model that transcends its local context, providing a roadmap for higher education institutions globally to transition from "passive tolerance" to "active intercultural engagement." In an era of increasing global migration and social polarization, the ability of a university to function as a microcosm of a democratic pluralistic society is paramount. This study contributes to the global discourse by demonstrating that multiculturalism is most effective when it is operationalized through lived experience and dialogical learning. Recent perspectives by Gultom (2025) suggest that the role of cultural empathy in the university setting is fundamental to developing a "human dignity" ethos that can be applied across various geopolitical landscapes. Ultimately, this research provides an essential framework for any institution seeking to cultivate global citizens who are not only aware of difference but are ethically equipped to engage with it transformatively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research reaffirms that the integration of cultural empathy is fundamental to the success of multicultural education in higher education. The findings

demonstrate that Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang has successfully moved beyond a purely descriptive approach to diversity by embedding empathy-based praxis into both its institutional policy and pedagogical interactions. This research significantly advances the theory of Transformative Multicultural Pedagogy by offering a new conceptual bridge: it posits that cultural empathy is not merely an internal affective state, but a "structural-pedagogical catalyst" that enables the transition from passive tolerance to active social recognition. By identifying specific dimensions such as collaborative knowledge construction and embodied cultural empowerment, this study provides a theoretical framework for how empathy can dismantle hierarchical cultural barriers within an academic ecosystem. Despite these insights, this qualitative exploration is limited by its specific institutional context and cross-sectional nature. To build upon these findings, future research should consider a longitudinal approach to track the long-term impact of empathy-based pedagogy on students' professional behaviors and social attitudes after they enter the workforce. Furthermore, there is a clear need for quantitative research involving larger, multi-campus samples to statistically validate the correlation between institutional empathy-based interventions and the reduction of prejudice. Such mixed-methods or longitudinal inquiries would provide a more robust generalization of how transformative pedagogy can be scaled to diverse national and international educational contexts.

Acknowledgments

Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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