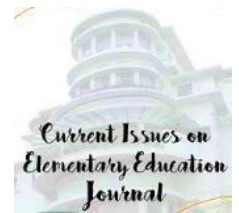




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INTEGRATING CULTURAL LITERACY INTO CIVIC EDUCATION : A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how cultural literacy is integrated into civic education within two public universities in Indonesia and Malaysia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through document analysis, semi structured interviews, and classroom observations to examine policy frameworks, teaching practices, and student experiences. The findings reveal a persistent gap between multicultural ideals and the realities of civic learning, where national curricula emphasize unity and nationalism but often overlook cultural diversity and indigenous perspectives. However, innovative lecturers employ culturally responsive pedagogy through community based projects and storytelling that foster student engagement and intercultural empathy. These practices demonstrate the potential for transformative learning when civic education embraces local wisdom and inclusivity. The study concludes that reforming civic education requires systemic policy support, teacher training in intercultural pedagogy, and curriculum frameworks that recognize cultural diversity as a democratic strength. By integrating cultural literacy, universities can cultivate civic actors who embody empathy, justice, and pluralism within multicultural societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, higher education institutions play a vital role in promoting civic awareness, democratic values, and inclusive citizenship in a culturally and ethnically diverse society. Civic education is viewed as a tool to strengthen democratic participation and address historical marginalization, yet it often remains state centered and formalistic, neglecting students' lived experiences and cultural identities (Unesco, 2021; Subkhan, 2019). Consequently, learners from minority or indigenous backgrounds frequently feel excluded, as civic curricula emphasize legal frameworks and nationalism over cultural understanding (Banks, 2008; Zembylas, 2015b). Addressing this gap requires integrating cultural literacy the ability to understand, respect, and critically engage with diverse traditions into civic education to cultivate empathy, intercultural dialogue, and socially just participation (Gay, 2018).

Integrating cultural literacy into civic education requires a multidimensional theoretical foundation that combines personal transformation, critical reflection, and structural analysis. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) emphasizes how learners reshape civic identities through reflection and dialogue when encountering perspectives that challenge their assumptions (Illeris, 2014; Taylor & Laros, 2014a). In civic contexts, this process allows students to move beyond inherited narratives of nationalism toward inclusive understandings of identity and citizenship (Cranton, 2009). Such transformation, both cognitive and emotional, deepens empathy and prepares learners for ethical participation in plural societies.

Complementing this, critical multicultural education challenges superficial treatments of diversity and instead urges engagement with systemic inequalities and historical power imbalances (Banks, 2008; Nieto, 1996; 2004). In postcolonial contexts, where civic education often promotes uniform loyalty to the nation, critical multiculturalism foregrounds marginalized voices, indigenous knowledge, and community-based practices as essential to decolonizing the curriculum (Janks, 2014; Dei & Kempf, 2006; Zajda, 2021). This approach reconceptualizes cultural literacy as an active, reflective practice that nurtures social awareness and civic responsibility (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Further strengthening this framework, culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) aligns teaching with students' cultural experiences, communication styles, and values. In civic education, such pedagogy makes learning relevant to students' real-world contexts by engaging local issues, oral histories, and community projects (Mutekwe, 2017a; Zembylas, 2015a). It enhances student agency, especially among marginalized learners, enabling them to connect civic knowledge with their everyday lives.

Recent literature underscores that civic curricula in postcolonial regions, including Indonesia, South Africa, and Malaysia, often silence minority voices and prioritize state ideology over plural civic engagement (Menashy & Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Jansen, 2019). However, emerging initiatives that integrate indigenous narratives, intercultural dialogue, and community-based learning have shown promise in fostering inclusive citizenship (Jansen, 2017; Suffian et al., 2025). These developments reflect a shift from static, nationalistic instruction toward dynamic civic learning grounded in justice, diversity, and cultural relevance.

This study therefore explores how Indonesian universities integrate cultural literacy within civic education examining policies, teaching methods, and student experiences. Drawing from transformative learning theory, critical multicultural education, and culturally responsive pedagogy, it aims to reveal how civic learning can evolve into a context-sensitive, empathetic,

and socially transformative practice that nurtures democratic citizens in multicultural societies (Syamsijulianto et al., 2024; Gay, 2018; Mutekwe, 2017b).

2. METHODS

This study used a qualitative case study design to examine how cultural literacy is integrated into civic education practices in two public universities, one in Indonesia and one in Malaysia. Both universities were selected for their multicultural student bodies and their involvement in civic initiatives. By taking a case study approach, the research aimed to capture the depth and nuances of how civic identity and cultural awareness are developed in real educational settings (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This choice of method reflects the study's focus on lived experiences and the socio-cultural aspects of higher education in the Global South.

To gather detailed and contextual data, the research employed three main methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Civic education syllabi, national curricula, and institutional policy documents were analyzed to uncover how cultural literacy is formally positioned within the educational framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants, including lecturers, curriculum developers, and students. This provided diverse perspectives on how civic and cultural goals are understood and implemented. Classroom observations over three months allowed the researcher to see how teaching practices matched or differed from the stated curricular goals. This combination of methods improved the study's reliability and highlighted both structural and interpersonal aspects of civic learning (Patton, 2015).

Thematic coding was used to analyze the qualitative data, following the framework laid out by Saldaña (2016). The analysis focused on recurring patterns, gaps in practice, and promising innovations. Key themes that emerged included the tension between national identity and cultural diversity in course content, the importance of local wisdom and indigenous knowledge in student engagement, and the challenges educators face when discussing sensitive cultural issues in civic discussions. Lecturers in both institutions noted that it is difficult to remain neutral while facilitating discussions about religion and ethnicity, which can be politically and emotionally charged in the classroom.

Building on these findings, the analysis also highlighted examples of effective practices, such as student-led forums, community based projects, and culturally relevant assignments that encouraged critical thinking and intercultural empathy. These approaches fostered deeper student engagement and challenged traditional models of knowledge transmission in favor of collaborative, participatory learning environments. Thus, the study emphasizes the significance of culturally responsive teaching in civic education and points to the potential of Southeast Asian universities to contribute meaningfully to global discussions on inclusive and transformative civic learning (Banks, 2008; Ibrahim, 2016; Suffian et al., 2025; Thu Nguyen et al., 2020). This grounded, human centered approach offers valuable insights for other multicultural educational settings, including those in Africa.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The findings of this study reveal how civic education in Indonesia and Malaysia reflects both the aspirations and contradictions of multicultural democratic societies. While policy frameworks officially promote diversity and inclusion, their practical implementation in university civic education remains dominated by state centered narratives and structural constraints. The results are presented across three interrelated dimensions policy

frameworks, classroom practices, and student perspectives which together illuminate the tensions between multicultural ideals and the lived realities of civic learning.

Despite national declarations supporting multiculturalism, such as Indonesia's *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) and Malaysia's *Rukun Negara* (National Principles), the civic education policies in both countries largely focus on state-centered narratives. These policies prioritize loyalty to the nation, understanding formal constitutional structures, and adopting prescribed national values. While this focus may promote unity and patriotism, it also limits civic space by marginalizing the rich cultural diversity and pluralistic realities that shape students' lives (Kee et al., 2022; Subkhan, 2019). The gap between multicultural ideals and policy implementation reveals what can be termed a "policy disjunction," where official commitments to diversity do not translate into educational frameworks.

This disjunction is evident in the limited curricular mentions of indigenous knowledge systems, minority narratives, and local civic traditions. Document analysis of both university curricula showed extensive coverage of civic duties, constitutional rights, and national ideology. However, there is a notable absence of learning objectives or assessment criteria that specifically address cultural literacy or critical multicultural skills. As Janks (2014) and Mutekwe (2017a) note, these gaps perpetuate epistemic injustice by favoring dominant knowledge systems and silencing marginalized voices. Consequently, civic education risks becoming a tool for assimilation rather than a platform for democratic engagement and intercultural understanding.

Interviews with lecturers and curriculum developers further highlighted the disconnect between policy discussions and teaching practice. While many educators acknowledged the need to include cultural perspectives in civic education, they cited constraints such as strict accreditation standards, lack of culturally relevant materials, and minimal institutional support. For instance, a lecturer from an Indonesian public university commented, "*We discuss diversity in theory, but there is no mandate or framework guiding us on how to teach it in civic classes.*" This reflects findings in other postcolonial contexts, where the implementation of multicultural education often remains superficial (J. A. Banks & McGee Banks, 2010; UNESCO, 2021). To move beyond these limitations, there is a pressing need to reshape civic education policies to prioritize cultural literacy and pluralism as essential competencies. Such a shift would align with global calls for inclusive and transformative education (Brookfield, 2012; UNESCO, 2021) and resonate with students' varied cultural backgrounds and aspirations.

The implementation of civic education in classrooms at two Indonesian universities reveals a complex landscape shaped by both structural limits and teaching creativity. On one end, some lecturers adhered strictly to standard syllabi focused primarily on national ideology, legal structures, and state mandated civic duties. These classes often relied on rote learning, textbook instruction, and limited student participation. As noted in student interviews, this method can make civics education feel abstract and detached from real-world civic identities and cultural experiences. This trend is not unique to Southeast Asia; similar patterns have been observed in postcolonial African institutions, where formal curricula often restrict educators from tailoring content to local contexts (Hoppers, 2023).

Conversely, several educators demonstrated creativity in rethinking civic learning through culturally responsive teaching. These lecturers incorporated case studies based on local customs, encouraged student-led exploration of ethnic traditions, and utilized experiential methods such as community mapping and storytelling. For example, one lecturer in Indonesia used *wayang kulit* to spark discussions about leadership, justice, and ethical decision-making.

Students reported that these sessions were intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging, as they connected timeless moral questions to familiar cultural symbols. This aligns with Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, which highlights critical reflection and contextual meaning-making as key to identity formation and empowerment.

However, these innovative practices mostly remain individual efforts and have not been institutionalized. While they show the potential of civic education to engage students in culturally relevant dialogues, they also reveal a concerning reliance on personal initiative rather than systemic support. Lecturers who implement culturally responsive methods often lack formal training, curricular resources, or institutional recognition. As noted by Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2021), culturally responsive teaching requires support from intentional policy frameworks and professional development to move beyond isolated efforts and encourage collective change across departments. These findings highlight the urgent need for institutions to create environments where innovation can flourish, be shared, and be improved. Civic education in multicultural societies cannot depend solely on exceptional teaching; it must be supported by structures that sustain creativity and inclusivity at all levels of academic practice.

Student perspectives gathered in this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of young people navigating civic identity in multicultural societies. In both Indonesian and Malaysian universities, students consistently expressed a desire for more culturally responsive and inclusive civic learning experiences. They criticized existing curricular content as too abstract, legalistic, and disconnected from their daily lives in diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities. This disconnect mirrors findings from other studies in African higher education, where students have also expressed frustration with civic education that emphasizes state narratives at the cost of cultural diversity and grassroots civic experiences (Chikoko & Khanare, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2020).

Moreover, students emphasized the importance of civic education that not only imparts knowledge of governance systems but also prepares them to navigate real world diversity. They highlighted the need to develop intercultural dialogue, social empathy, and civic responsibility within diverse contexts. Students from indigenous and minority backgrounds noted the exclusion of their histories and civic contributions from classroom narratives, which contributed to feelings of invisibility and marginalization. This omission is concerning in societies where democratic participation and social cohesion depend on intergroup understanding and recognition (Banks, 2019). When civic education neglects these aspects, it risks reinforcing social hierarchies instead of challenging them.

In their reflections, students recounted moments of transformative learning when lecturers included culturally relevant content or invited them to share personal stories. Assignments that encouraged storytelling, community engagement, or comparative analysis of civic traditions were seen as empowering and intellectually stimulating. These experiences affirmed their cultural identities and helped them view civic participation as dynamic and rooted in their heritage. Such moments align with Freire et al.'s (2020) conception of education as a dialogic process, where learners actively co-create knowledge rather than passively receive state defined norms.

Collectively, these student perspectives underscore a critical insight: reforming civic education cannot rely solely on policy mandates or top-down curriculum design. It requires active engagement with students as co-creators of knowledge, recognizing their cultural realities as central to the educational process. Institutional change guided by student agency

and grounded in principles of decolonization and epistemic justice is essential for building a truly inclusive civic education ecosystem in higher education.

3.2 Discussion

The findings reveal a noticeable gap between the goals of civic education policies and the realities faced by students in multicultural and multiethnic learning environments. National curricula often strive to create a unified sense of national identity, but they unintentionally overlook the cultural diversity that defines many student groups. This disconnect is particularly concerning in areas with a history of marginalization and cultural fragmentation, as focusing on a uniform national narrative can silence minority voices (Banks, 2019). Instead of building a shared democratic culture, these methods may perpetuate systemic exclusions and increase civic disengagement among marginalized youth. Effectively integrating cultural literacy into civic education therefore requires more than just the inclusion of diverse cultural elements. As Zembylas (2015b) argues, educators should engage in “pedagogies of strategic empathy,” which not only acknowledge cultural differences but also question historical injustices and cultivate critical awareness. This approach urges teachers to move beyond knowledge transmission toward facilitating ethical interactions across cultural divides, making classrooms inclusive civic spaces where students’ identities are recognized and valued. Rethinking civic education through a cultural literacy perspective also demands a major shift in its purpose from producing obedient and loyal citizens to developing civic actors who are critically aware, socially responsible, and able to navigate complex cultural landscapes with empathy and justice (Levinson, 2011). Such transformation aligns with global calls for education systems that meet the needs of democratic pluralism by promoting intercultural understanding and ethical engagement (UNESCO, 2021), positioning cultural literacy not merely as a pedagogical tool but as a democratic necessity.

To drive this transformation, teacher education must evolve. Preservice and in-service programs need to integrate critical cultural pedagogy that enables educators to reflect on their roles and the power dynamics embedded in their teaching methods (Howard, 2019). Without such foundational preparation, efforts to introduce cultural literacy may be superficial or even reinforce dominant ideologies under the guise of inclusivity. Empowering educators is essential, as they are central to adapting curricula, creating engaging environments, and modeling civic empathy in practice. Institutional support and policy reform are equally vital for sustaining these innovations. Schools require culturally relevant materials, inclusive policies, and community engagement strategies that mirror students’ lived realities. Assessment systems must also move beyond cognitive measures of civic knowledge to evaluate the emotional and ethical dimensions of civic participation (Osler & Starkey, 2018). Without such structural changes, even the most well-intentioned reforms may falter. Closing the gap between civic education and cultural diversity thus demands a multifaceted approach one that integrates strategic empathy in teaching, redefines civic education’s aims, revamps teacher training, and embeds supportive institutional frameworks to cultivate a generation of civic actors who view diversity as a democratic resource rather than a challenge.

The insights from this study call policymakers and educators to reconceptualize civic education with a focus on inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and social justice. Traditional civic curricula often shaped by postcolonial legacies and nationalistic objectives should be reimaged to reflect the lived experiences of diverse student populations. In many African and postcolonial contexts, current frameworks privilege dominant cultural narratives while

marginalizing indigenous, ethnic, and religious minorities, limiting students' sense of belonging and agency within democracy. Addressing these issues requires policies that prioritize local cultural knowledge and indigenous governance models within national curricula. Recognizing communal decision-making, ancestral knowledge, and indigenous ethics empowers students to see themselves as valid civic contributors. When civic concepts resonate with students' cultural identities, engagement deepens and ownership of civic responsibility grows. This localized approach does not reject national identity but broadens it to embrace multiple cultural heritages.

Teaching practices must also evolve. Teachers key agents in translating policy into practice need autonomy and preparation to teach in culturally responsive ways. Professional development should go beyond technical skill-building to include critical reflection, intersectional analysis, and dialogic teaching. Educators must learn to engage with students' diverse identities and experiences while fostering safe spaces for dialogue about power, history, and justice. As Zembylas (2015) emphasizes, pedagogies of strategic empathy guide educators through these emotional terrains and facilitate transformative learning. Civic education must also address global issues climate justice, migration, digital citizenship, and human rights through decolonial and non-Western perspectives. When framed within the historical and social contexts of the Global South, such approaches promote solidarity-based civic engagement and a more critical global consciousness. Sustainable transformation requires institutional backing; ministries of education must align curricula, assessments, and teacher training with inclusive civic values. Universities and teacher colleges should lead by integrating decolonial and culturally grounded perspectives, supported by resources, collaboration, and clear frameworks for implementation. The future of civic education in Africa and other postcolonial societies thus hinges on its ability to honor diversity, confront historical injustices, and foster ethical democratic participation. Policy reform and teaching innovation must operate symbiotically policy provides the structure while pedagogy breathes life into it creating civic learning spaces where all students feel valued and empowered.

Curriculum reform serves as a crucial entry point for transforming civic education into a more inclusive and empowering experience. Ministries and universities must revise frameworks to reflect the experiences of diverse learners by incorporating local cultural knowledge and indigenous governance systems that represent historical, ethical, and communal values. Practices such as consensus-building, elder councils, and restorative justice embody civic ethics and offer viable models for participatory democracy. Encountering these systems in formal education helps students view their cultural heritage as an active component of civic life rather than a relic of the past. Moreover, integrating intersectional perspectives enables students to critically examine how identity, citizenship, and power intersect in their lives. Civic education should further expand to include global concerns ranging from climate justice to human rights viewed through decolonial and non-Western lenses. Rather than simply adding new content, curriculum reform should reframe civic learning as a plural, reflective, and justice centered practice.

To ensure sustainability, lecturers must receive consistent training in intercultural pedagogy, culturally responsive assessment, and community-centered learning approaches. Institutions should incentivize innovation and foster collaboration, offering platforms for interdisciplinary engagement connecting civic education with fields like anthropology, history, environmental studies, and gender studies. When universities promote such exchanges, they ground civic learning in real-world complexity. Systemic support ensures curriculum reform becomes part of a collective transformation rather than isolated initiatives.

Finally, critical multicultural education redefines the intersection of diversity, power, and knowledge in learning spaces, especially within postcolonial contexts. Unlike tokenistic approaches that reduce cultural appreciation to festivals or food, this pedagogy challenges both educators and students to confront systemic inequalities and historical silences within curricula (Banks, 2019; Nieto, 1996). It exposes how dominant epistemologies marginalize non-Western worldviews and perpetuate “epistemic violence,” as Spivak describes. Cultural literacy thus becomes an active, critical process of self-location, compelling learners to interrogate positionality, acknowledge privilege, and embrace civic responsibility within wider social structures (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017). This is especially pressing in Global South nations, where civic education often serves as a statecraft tool to promote uniform identity over pluralistic dialogue (UNESCO, 2021; Zajda, 2021). To counter this, scholars advocate for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems, minority voices, and community-based civic practices such as oral histories, collective stewardship, and intergenerational mentorship (Dei & Kempf, 2006; Janks, 2014). By embracing such transformative pedagogies, higher education can evolve from merely teaching about diversity to embodying equity, dignity, and civic empowerment in deeply contextualized and socially just ways.

5. CONCLUSION

Transforming civic education through cultural literacy is an important step toward fostering inclusive, critical-thinking citizens. This change requires collaboration among policymakers, educators, and students. A relevant curriculum, adequate teacher training, and a learning environment that values student voices are essential for higher education to fulfill its role as a producer of a generation ready to build a just and democratic society.

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