

Implementing Multicultural Education in Early Childhood: A Case Study of Abdullah School, Aligarh, India

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the implementation of multicultural education in early childhood settings in India, with a particular focus on Abdullah School in Aligarh, which serves a culturally and religiously diverse student body. It aims to address gaps in existing research by exploring how multicultural values are conceptualized and implemented, and their impact on students during early childhood, a critical developmental phase.

Methods/Design/Approach – This qualitative case study utilized classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with school staff, and document analysis. The sample included the school's principal, teachers, and students. Thematic analysis was employed to examine multicultural education practices, categorizing data into school policies and classroom activities that promote multicultural values.

Findings – The study found that Abdullah School's approach to multicultural education is deeply rooted in principles of inclusivity, respect for diversity, and gender equality. The school integrates these values through tailored curricula for students of different religious backgrounds and promotes cooperation and tolerance through extracurricular activities. While effective, challenges related to infrastructure and societal biases were noted.

Originality/Value – This study provides a rare analysis of multicultural education in early childhood settings in India, offering insights into the effectiveness of implementing multicultural values at a formative age. It highlights the unique socio-cultural context of India and offers practical models for fostering inclusivity and social harmony in diverse societies.

Practical Implications – The findings suggest that schools with diverse populations can adopt dual-track curricula and extracurricular activities that emphasize respect for diversity. Policymakers should focus on providing infrastructure support and resources to sustain effective multicultural education.

Keywords Multicultural education, early childhood, inclusivity, India, diversity

Paper type Research paper

Article History

Received	15 March 2024
Revised	19 May 2024
	26 August 2024
Accepted	30 September 2024

1. Introduction

The significance of multicultural education, particularly in early childhood settings, has received increasing attention in recent years. Multicultural education aims to promote understanding, respect, and cooperation among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated rather than marginalized. In countries like India, where ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity is vast, managing and embracing cultural differences is crucial for social harmony. Early childhood education is recognized as a critical period for instilling these values, as it is during this stage that foundational aspects of human character are formed. 80% of human character development occurs during early childhood, highlighting the vital role of education in shaping children's social and emotional competencies (Dryden & Vos, 2000).

Multiculturalism refers not only to the existence of a culturally diverse society but also to policies and programs aimed at respecting and protecting the cultural diversity of individuals. It emphasizes the recognition, acceptance, and promotion of multiple identities within individuals and communities. In India, multiculturalism is intricately linked to the caste system and religious diversity, with a population comprising 80.5% Hindus, 13.4% Muslims, 2.3% Christians, and 2.1% Sikhs, among other religious groups. Research into multicultural education in India has covered various aspects, including the use of folklore in children's learning experiences, learning strategies in multicultural classrooms, and its application at different schooling levels. However, these studies have not provided an in-depth analysis of multicultural education in early childhood settings, which this study aims to address.

Research has shown that early exposure to multicultural principles fosters the development of essential values such as respect, tolerance, empathy, and cooperation (Lawrence, 2004). These qualities are essential for maintaining social cohesion in diverse societies. Biases in religious education textbooks, particularly in Islamic and Christian texts, often perpetuate patriarchal norms, undermining the promotion of equality and fairness. Such educational materials need revision to foster gender-sensitive education, promoting both equality and equity for men and women in social, cultural, and political spheres (Murfi, 2014).

In legal contexts, tensions between multiculturalism and gender equality can also be observed. The Shah Bano case in India, where feminist demands for gender justice were in conflict with the rights of religious minorities, illustrates the challenges of achieving gender equality within multicultural societies, where religious or cultural practices may conflict with universal norms of justice and equality (Mullally, 2004). This case suggests that more nuanced approaches are needed to reconcile these competing interests (Mullally, 2004).

Furthermore, the importance of culturally relevant education through the use of literature, particularly folklore, in promoting multicultural values in early education is underscored by the use of such lessons to engage students and foster values such as tolerance and cooperation, making multicultural education more impactful in diverse cultural settings (Mehta, 2013).

The importance of culturally responsive care in early childhood classrooms is further expanded through the identification of three key categories of care practices—affirming and attuning, diffusing and soothing, and anchoring and building—that teachers employ to respond to the diverse cultural needs of students in India (Kurian, 2024). These strategies, alongside the use of aesthetic and relational tools, such as folklore and mythology, help create an inclusive and empathetic classroom environment, promoting peace and mutual respect among students from varied cultural backgrounds (Kurian, 2024).

While the literature provides valuable insights, significant gaps remain. First, while studies have identified the benefits of multicultural education, there is insufficient evidence

on the specific models or strategies most effective in early childhood education settings. Second, a methodological gap exists in evaluating multicultural education across countries with varying levels of diversity and socio-economic contexts. Finally, there is an empirical gap in comparing the effectiveness of multicultural education models in diverse cultural environments, particularly in India.

To address these gaps, this study seeks to explore models of multicultural education in early childhood schools in India. The research investigates three key questions: (1) What is the concept of multicultural education as applied in early childhood education in India? (2) How is multicultural education implemented in early childhood schools in India? (3) What is the impact of habituating multicultural values in early childhood education on students in India? These questions aim to provide a deeper understanding of how early childhood education in India addresses the challenges and opportunities presented by multiculturalism and how these models can contribute to more inclusive educational practices.

This study focuses on Abdullah School in Aligarh, India, which is known for its diverse student body and its emphasis on fostering positive change in a multicultural society. Abdullah School, founded to disseminate the ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, serves as an ideal case study for exploring how multicultural education is practiced in a context marked by significant religious and ethnic diversity. By studying multicultural education practices in this context, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how early childhood education can shape more inclusive and peaceful societies.

2. Methods

This study adopts an interpretative paradigm, aiming to describe and interpret models of multicultural education in early childhood education in India. Specifically, the research focuses on understanding how multicultural education is conceptualized and implemented in early childhood settings within India's diverse cultural context. Interpretive research seeks to understand the subjective world of human experience, making it suitable for exploring educational practices in specific contexts (Cohen et al., 2018).

2.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study design, providing an in-depth exploration of multicultural education practices at Abdullah School in Aligarh, India. A case study design is appropriate as it allows for detailed investigation of specific educational practices in a real-world context of cultural diversity (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Case studies are particularly useful in education research for examining complex phenomena within their contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.2 Participants

Participants include the principal, teachers, and students at Abdullah School, which was purposively selected due to its notable multicultural education practices. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2015). Data from these participants provide a comprehensive view of how multicultural education is conceptualized and implemented at both the institutional and classroom levels.

2.3 Data Collection

To comprehensively explore how multicultural education is implemented at Abdullah School, data was collected through a combination of observational techniques, interviews,

and document analysis. This triangulation of methods ensures a robust understanding of both the practical and institutional aspects of multicultural education, providing a well-rounded perspective on the subject.

The first method, observation, was employed to capture the real-time integration of multicultural education into daily classroom activities and school policies. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to witness how multicultural values are practically implemented, with particular attention to character education in early childhood settings. Observational methods are valuable in qualitative research for capturing naturalistic behaviors and practices as they unfold in real-world contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By observing interactions between teachers and students, as well as the learning environment itself, the study gathered insights into the ways multicultural education is lived out in the classroom.

In addition to observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including the principal and teachers. These interviews aimed to explore participants' perspectives on multicultural education, particularly how they conceptualize and apply it within the classroom. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific topics while maintaining consistency across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews provided qualitative data on educators' beliefs, challenges, and experiences related to multicultural practices, enriching the findings from the observations.

Lastly, document analysis was carried out to examine relevant institutional materials, such as lesson plans, school policies, and other curricular documents. Analyzing these documents helped reveal the formal strategies employed by the school to embed multicultural values into its educational framework. Document analysis is a critical method for gaining insights into institutional practices and ensuring that the policies align with observed classroom activities and reported practices (Bowen, 2009).

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically, categorizing findings into school policies on multicultural education and practical activities promoting these values. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both deductive and inductive coding were used to ensure that the analysis addresses the research questions while remaining grounded in the data (Miles et al., 2014).

3. Results

The results of this study provide an in-depth understanding of how multicultural education is conceptualized and implemented at Abdullah School in Aligarh, India. These findings are organized into three main sections corresponding to the research questions: the concept of multicultural education, its implementation, and the impact of habituating multicultural values on students.

3.1 The Concept of Multicultural Education at Abdullah School

At Abdullah School, the concept of multicultural education is deeply intertwined with the educational philosophy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). Sir Syed emphasized the importance of inclusivity and the need for education to transcend religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. This philosophy is reflected in the school's policies, curriculum, and overall environment.

The principal, Mrs. Umra Zaheer, noted in an interview: "We follow the principles laid down by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, focusing on creating an inclusive environment where

students from all backgrounds—be they Hindu, Muslim, or otherwise—can learn together in harmony."

This conceptualization of multicultural education at Abdullah School is grounded in fostering mutual respect and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. The school's leadership promotes these values through both formal and informal mechanisms. The curriculum integrates lessons that emphasize empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity. As Mrs. Zaheer added: "We teach our students that diversity is not something to be feared or avoided, but rather something to be celebrated. This is a core principle of our educational approach."

In addition to religious diversity, gender inclusivity plays a crucial role in the school's concept of multiculturalism. The school's leadership, exemplified by the female principal, reflects its commitment to gender equality, another aspect of inclusivity promoted within the school.

3.2 Implementation of Multicultural Education at Abdullah School

The implementation of multicultural education at Abdullah School is carried out through both curricular and extracurricular activities. Observations revealed that multicultural principles are embedded in daily classroom activities, school policies, and interactions between students and teachers.

The religious education curriculum at Abdullah School is tailored to reflect the diverse backgrounds of its students. Muslim students, who form the majority, study a curriculum based on Islamic teachings, including the Qur'an and the Hadith. However, the school ensures that within the Muslim student body, an environment of mutual respect between different sects is maintained.

For non-Muslim students, particularly Hindus, the school provides a separate moral education curriculum, focusing on universal values such as respect, cooperation, and empathy. This dual-track approach ensures that all students, regardless of their religious affiliation, receive an education that instills moral values while respecting their cultural backgrounds.

The classroom dynamics at Abdullah School reinforce the school's multicultural ethos. Teachers, themselves from diverse religious backgrounds, play a crucial role in modeling tolerance and respect. In one observed classroom, a Hindu teacher was instructing a predominantly Muslim class, demonstrating the diversity among staff and students.

Teachers integrate multicultural principles into daily lessons, using real-life examples to help students understand the value of diversity. Collaborative group projects, for instance, help students from different backgrounds work together and develop essential teamwork skills.

Beyond the classroom, Abdullah School encourages students to participate in extracurricular activities that promote multiculturalism. Cultural exchange programs and community engagement events, such as neighborhood clean-up drives, are organized, fostering unity and respect for cultural diversity.

3.3 Impact of Habituating Multicultural Values in Early Childhood Education

The impact of Abdullah School's multicultural education model is both profound and multifaceted. One of the most significant outcomes is the way in which young students internalize and embody values such as tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity. This was evident during classroom observations, where students demonstrated an ability to interact respectfully and cooperatively, regardless of religious or cultural differences. For example, during group activities, students from different faith backgrounds naturally worked together, showing a level of comfort and openness that is often rare in environments without structured multicultural education. This suggests that habituating

multicultural values in early childhood lays a foundation for lifelong social cohesion and inclusivity.

Additionally, the school's multicultural approach fosters an environment where children not only accept but also celebrate differences. Events such as multicultural festivals, where students and parents showcase food, attire, and traditions from their respective cultures, further reinforce this inclusivity. Through such activities, students develop a deeper appreciation for the richness of cultural diversity, rather than viewing differences as barriers.

The impact of this model also extends beyond the classroom. Interviews with parents revealed that many appreciate the school's commitment to teaching their children about respect for other religions and cultures. Parents from various cultural and religious backgrounds expressed satisfaction, noting that their children not only learned about their own traditions but also gained knowledge about others. For instance, one parent from a Muslim family shared how their child could explain aspects of Christian and Hindu traditions, which they viewed as a significant advantage in fostering a global mindset. This feedback underscores the broader social impact of multicultural education, which not only shapes the children but also influences family attitudes toward diversity.

Furthermore, the school's emphasis on character education, integrated with multicultural values, is seen as essential in developing social-emotional competencies among students. Teachers noted improvements in students' abilities to resolve conflicts amicably and understand multiple perspectives, skills that are critical in today's increasingly interconnected world. The long-term effects of these values are anticipated to create individuals who are better equipped to contribute to and thrive in diverse societies.

3.4 Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite the evident successes of Abdullah School's multicultural education model, several challenges persist. One notable challenge is related to infrastructure limitations due to increasing enrollment. As the reputation of the school's inclusive and diverse learning environment grows, so does the number of students enrolling. This surge in student numbers has led to overcrowded classrooms and pressure on the existing resources and facilities. Teachers have expressed concerns about maintaining the quality of personalized attention and multicultural engagement as class sizes increase. Addressing this will require strategic expansion of the school's physical and human resources, as well as ongoing investment in teacher training to ensure educators can manage larger, more diverse groups of students without compromising the quality of education.

Another challenge stems from the occasional societal biases that students bring into the classroom. Although Abdullah School strives to cultivate an environment of acceptance and respect, it cannot fully shield its students from the prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in the broader society. Teachers reported instances where students exhibited biases against certain religious or ethnic groups, often reflecting views they may have encountered at home or in the community. This underscores the challenge of reconciling the progressive multicultural education provided at school with the more conservative or exclusionary attitudes that children may be exposed to outside the school environment.

To address these societal biases, Abdullah School has implemented continuous teacher training programs focused on multicultural sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy. These programs equip teachers with strategies to identify and address biases in the classroom, turning potentially divisive moments into teachable opportunities. For example, teachers are trained to facilitate discussions that encourage students to critically examine and challenge stereotypes, fostering a culture of dialogue and reflection. Additionally, the school has introduced community outreach programs that engage parents and local leaders in discussions about the importance of multicultural education. These initiatives

aim to create a broader cultural shift within the community, making it more supportive of the school's inclusive ethos.

However, even with these interventions, there is room for improvement. Teachers suggested that more could be done to involve parents more actively in the multicultural education process, as home environments play a critical role in shaping children's attitudes towards diversity. The school could, for example, host workshops or seminars for parents, providing them with tools to continue reinforcing multicultural values at home. Additionally, expanding partnerships with local cultural organizations and religious institutions could provide students with more immersive, hands-on experiences with diverse traditions, deepening their understanding and appreciation of different cultures.

In conclusion, while Abdullah School has made significant strides in embedding multicultural education into its early childhood programs, it must continue to adapt and evolve in response to both internal and external challenges. By addressing infrastructure constraints, actively combating societal biases, and enhancing community involvement, the school can further strengthen its impact and serve as a model for other institutions seeking to implement inclusive and multicultural education practices.

4. Discussion

The findings from Abdullah School reveal that multicultural education is conceptualized as a vehicle for inclusivity and is deeply intertwined with the philosophy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. The school's commitment to fostering respect, tolerance, and cooperation aligns with the hypothesis that early exposure to multicultural principles promotes the development of empathy, tolerance, and respect. The principal's emphasis on celebrating diversity reflects the belief that early childhood is the ideal stage for instilling these values.

The study highlights the importance of both curricular and extracurricular activities in promoting multiculturalism. The dual-track educational system, accommodating religious teachings for Muslim students and moral education for non-Muslims, ensures that all students receive an education that respects their cultural backgrounds while emphasizing shared values like empathy and cooperation. This model shows the significance of tailored educational approaches to different cultural groups, supporting the research objective of understanding how multicultural education is implemented.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of multicultural education in diverse societies. The early inculcation of multicultural values to help children appreciate differences in ethnicity, religion, and culture has been advocated (Banks, 1991). Abdullah School's practices align with this view, as they promote inclusivity through a curriculum that respects students' religious and cultural backgrounds. However, unlike the focus on broad multiculturalism, the Abdullah School model places a distinct emphasis on religious diversity, particularly within the context of India's multi-faith society (Banks, 1991).

The importance of culturally responsive care in early childhood settings has also been explored, with practices identified that foster inclusion and empathy (Kurian, 2024). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating how multicultural education can be practically implemented through both curricular and extracurricular activities. While Kurian highlighted teacher-care practices, this research shows how an institution-wide approach to multiculturalism, incorporating both teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions, contributes to an inclusive educational environment (Kurian, 2024).

However, challenges identified in this study, such as infrastructure limitations and societal biases, mirror findings that highlight the need for continuous reforms in educational materials to promote gender-sensitive and inclusive learning (Murfi, 2014). These challenges suggest that while Abdullah School has made significant strides, further

efforts are necessary to fully overcome obstacles to inclusivity in multicultural settings (Murfi, 2014).

Abdullah School's case also demonstrates that early childhood is a relatively smooth phase for implementing multicultural education, where societal biases are less ingrained compared to secondary education. However, the study identifies ongoing challenges, particularly in managing societal biases that students may bring into the classroom.

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of multicultural education by showcasing how early childhood institutions in diverse socio-cultural contexts, like India, can serve as catalysts for social harmony. It reinforces the idea that multicultural education models must be adaptive, addressing religious diversity and gender inclusivity in local communities. Abdullah School's integration of Islamic teachings alongside universal moral education principles suggests that a hybrid approach could be highly effective in societies with multiple, coexisting cultural identities.

The practical implications for educators and policymakers are significant. Abdullah School's model can serve as an example for other early childhood institutions in multicultural environments. Schools should adopt dual-track curricula that respect religious and cultural diversity while emphasizing shared values. Teacher diversity and continuous training on managing classroom biases are also critical for fostering inclusive environments. Schools should also focus on extracurricular activities that encourage cultural exchange, as these have proven effective in promoting mutual respect among students.

Policymakers should consider supporting schools like Abdullah by providing additional resources to address infrastructure challenges and ensure they can continue to serve diverse populations effectively.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of early childhood education in promoting multicultural values, as evidenced by the case of Abdullah School in Aligarh, India. The research demonstrates that the school's approach to multicultural education, rooted in inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diversity, significantly shapes students' social and emotional competencies. By integrating multicultural principles into both curricular and extracurricular activities, Abdullah School fosters an environment where religious, cultural, and gender differences are celebrated rather than marginalized.

Key findings emphasize that multicultural education can be effectively implemented through tailored curricula that respect students' cultural backgrounds while focusing on universal values such as empathy and cooperation. The school's leadership, particularly in promoting gender equality and religious inclusivity, has further strengthened the positive outcomes of multicultural education.

However, the study identifies challenges, such as the need for better infrastructure and occasional societal biases in the classroom. These limitations suggest areas for improvement. Moreover, the study's focus on a single school and its qualitative approach limits the generalizability of the findings. Expanding research to include a broader range of schools and employing quantitative methods could provide more comprehensive insights into the long-term impact of multicultural education.

In practice, the findings suggest that other educational institutions in diverse socio-cultural settings could adopt similar models of multicultural education. This would require a commitment to inclusive leadership, teacher training, and community engagement. Policymakers should consider supporting schools with diverse student populations by addressing infrastructure needs and providing resources to sustain effective multicultural education practices.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of early exposure to multicultural principles in shaping inclusive, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals, contributing to long-term social harmony in multicultural societies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Muqowim: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Project Administration. **Erni Munastiwi:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing, Formal Analysis, Resources, Data Curation, Visualization.

Funding statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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