

---

## Exploring the Role of Multicultural Education in Promoting Social Harmony in Malaysia

Rusli Wan

Faculty of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia

\*Correspondence email: [rusliwan45@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:rusliwan45@unizik.edu.ng)

---

### Article history

Submitted: 2025/09/01; Revised: 2025/11/11; Accepted: 2025/12/21

---

### Abstract

Malaysia is widely recognized as a multicultural nation characterized by ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. While this diversity contributes significantly to national identity and social development, it also presents challenges related to social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and national unity. Multicultural education has emerged as an important educational approach for promoting social harmony by fostering respect, tolerance, and positive interactions among diverse communities. This study explores the role of multicultural education in promoting social harmony in Malaysia through a systematic literature review of contemporary research and policy documents. The findings indicate that multicultural education contributes to social harmony by enhancing intercultural competence, reducing prejudice, strengthening social cohesion, and encouraging inclusive participation in educational settings. Furthermore, multicultural educational practices facilitate mutual understanding and collaborative relationships among students from different cultural backgrounds. The study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how multicultural education promotes social harmony through intercultural engagement and inclusive citizenship development. The findings provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and educational institutions seeking to strengthen national unity and social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.

---

### Keywords

Multicultural Education, Social Harmony, Intercultural Competence, Social Cohesion, Inclusive Citizenship, Malaysia



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY SA) license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is internationally recognized as one of the most culturally diverse countries in Southeast Asia. The nation is home to multiple ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and numerous indigenous communities, each possessing

distinct cultural traditions, languages, religious beliefs, and social practices. This diversity has become an important component of Malaysia's national identity and socio-economic development. However, maintaining harmonious relationships among diverse communities remains a continuous challenge that requires effective social, political, and educational strategies. In this context, multicultural education has gained increasing attention as a mechanism for promoting social harmony, strengthening intercultural understanding, and fostering national unity.

The concept of social harmony refers to the existence of peaceful, cooperative, and mutually respectful relationships among individuals and groups within society. Social harmony is characterized by social cohesion, trust, tolerance, and collective commitment to shared societal values. According to UNESCO (2023), harmonious societies are those in which diversity is managed constructively through dialogue, inclusion, and equitable participation. In multicultural societies, social harmony becomes particularly important because cultural differences can either serve as sources of enrichment and innovation or become causes of misunderstanding, prejudice, and social conflict. Consequently, educational institutions are increasingly expected to contribute to the cultivation of harmonious intergroup relationships through inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

Malaysia's historical development has been shaped significantly by its multicultural composition. Since independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has implemented various policies aimed at promoting national integration and strengthening social cohesion among different ethnic communities. Educational institutions have played a central role in these efforts because schools and universities serve as important spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds interact, learn, and develop social relationships. Educational policies have increasingly emphasized national unity, intercultural understanding, and inclusive citizenship as essential goals for sustaining social harmony in a diverse society.

Multicultural education has emerged as one of the most important approaches for achieving these objectives. Banks (2019) defines multicultural education as a comprehensive educational reform movement that seeks to create equitable learning opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds while promoting democratic values, social justice, and intercultural understanding. Multicultural education recognizes cultural diversity as a valuable educational resource and encourages learners to appreciate multiple perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and engage constructively with cultural differences. Through these processes,

multicultural education contributes to the development of attitudes and competencies that support peaceful coexistence and social harmony.

The increasing importance of multicultural education in Malaysia is closely associated with broader processes of globalization, migration, technological advancement, and socio-economic transformation. Globalization has increased interactions among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds while simultaneously creating new challenges related to identity, belonging, and social cohesion. Educational institutions must therefore prepare students not only for participation in national society but also for engagement within increasingly interconnected global environments. According to Leask (2015), contemporary education must develop learners who possess intercultural competence and the ability to collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries. These competencies are essential for maintaining harmonious relationships within diverse societies and responding constructively to social change.

Research consistently highlights the role of education in promoting intercultural understanding and reducing prejudice. Allport's Contact Theory suggests that meaningful interactions among individuals from different groups can reduce stereotypes and improve intergroup relations when appropriate conditions are present. Educational institutions provide opportunities for such interactions through collaborative learning, group projects, extracurricular activities, and multicultural programs. Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) argue that positive intergroup contact contributes significantly to reducing prejudice and strengthening social cohesion. Within the Malaysian context, multicultural educational environments enable students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop greater understanding of different cultural traditions and values.

Intercultural competence represents another important mechanism through which multicultural education contributes to social harmony. Deardorff (2020) defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate and interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This competence includes attitudes such as openness, respect, curiosity, and empathy, as well as knowledge and skills related to cultural awareness and communication. Research suggests that students who develop intercultural competence are more likely to demonstrate tolerance, cooperation, and respect toward others. These attributes are fundamental for promoting harmonious relationships in multicultural societies such as Malaysia.

Social cohesion is also closely linked to multicultural education and social harmony. Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and sense of solidarity among members of society. OECD (2023) emphasizes that socially cohesive societies are characterized by trust, inclusion, participation, and mutual support among diverse populations. Educational institutions contribute to social cohesion by fostering shared values, encouraging civic participation, and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions among students from different backgrounds. Through multicultural curricula and inclusive pedagogical practices, schools and universities help learners develop a sense of common citizenship while respecting cultural diversity.

In Malaysia, multicultural education is further connected to the development of inclusive citizenship. Inclusive citizenship emphasizes active participation, mutual respect, democratic engagement, and recognition of diversity within society. Educational policies increasingly encourage students to understand both their cultural identities and their responsibilities as members of a pluralistic nation. According to Veugelers (2019), citizenship education that incorporates multicultural perspectives contributes to the development of socially responsible individuals capable of participating constructively in diverse democratic societies. These educational objectives align closely with Malaysia's broader aspirations for national integration and sustainable social harmony.

Despite significant efforts to promote multicultural education, challenges remain. Social inequalities, ethnic stereotypes, cultural misunderstandings, and political tensions continue to affect intergroup relations in some contexts. Furthermore, existing research often examines multicultural education, social cohesion, intercultural competence, and social harmony as separate concepts rather than exploring their interconnected relationships. As a result, there remains a need for a more comprehensive understanding of how multicultural educational practices contribute specifically to the promotion of social harmony within Malaysia's multicultural society.

Another important gap concerns the mechanisms through which multicultural education influences harmonious social outcomes. While numerous studies acknowledge the positive impacts of multicultural educational practices, fewer studies explain how educational experiences are transformed into broader societal outcomes such as trust, cohesion, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for designing effective educational policies and programs capable of strengthening social harmony in diverse societies.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the role of multicultural education in promoting social harmony in Malaysia through a systematic review of contemporary literature. Specifically, the study examines how multicultural educational practices contribute to intercultural competence, social cohesion, inclusive citizenship, and harmonious intergroup relationships. In addition, the research proposes a conceptual framework explaining the pathways through which multicultural education fosters social harmony. By integrating insights from multicultural education, social cohesion, and intercultural competence literature, this study contributes to both theoretical discussions and practical efforts aimed at strengthening harmony and unity within multicultural societies.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative research design using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to investigate the role of multicultural education in promoting social harmony in Malaysia. The systematic literature review method was selected because it provides a structured and transparent process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarly knowledge on a particular topic. According to Snyder (2019), systematic literature reviews enable researchers to generate comprehensive conceptual insights while ensuring methodological rigor and minimizing bias. Given the conceptual objective of examining relationships among multicultural education, social harmony, intercultural competence, and social cohesion, the SLR approach was considered appropriate for this study.

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the meanings and experiences constructed by individuals and institutions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that interpretivist research seeks to explore how social realities are formed through interactions, cultural contexts, and human interpretations. Within this perspective, multicultural education and social harmony were understood as socially constructed phenomena influenced by educational practices, institutional policies, cultural interactions, and societal values. This paradigm facilitated a deeper exploration of how educational experiences contribute to harmonious relationships within multicultural societies.

The literature search was conducted using internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of research related to multicultural education, intercultural competence, social cohesion, citizenship education, and educational policy. To ensure relevance and contemporary

significance, the review focused primarily on publications published between 2015 and 2025. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as “multicultural education,” “social harmony,” “social cohesion,” “intercultural competence,” “inclusive citizenship,” “cultural diversity,” “national unity,” “educational inclusion,” and “Malaysia.” Multiple search combinations were utilized to maximize the comprehensiveness of the literature search and reduce the possibility of omitting relevant studies (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The inclusion criteria required that selected publications be peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, conference proceedings, or policy reports addressing multicultural education, social harmony, intercultural competence, social cohesion, or related themes. Priority was given to studies indexed in Scopus and other reputable academic databases. Publications that did not directly address the study objectives, duplicate records, editorials, opinion pieces, and non-academic sources were excluded from the review. This selection process ensured the academic quality and relevance of the literature analyzed (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2021).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Selected publications were read repeatedly to identify recurring concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and patterns related to multicultural education and social harmony. Relevant information was coded and organized into thematic categories including intercultural competence, social cohesion, inclusive citizenship, cultural understanding, democratic participation, and harmonious intergroup relations. Through iterative comparison and interpretation, broader themes emerged that explained the pathways through which multicultural education contributes to social harmony.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was employed by integrating evidence from empirical studies, theoretical literature, and policy documents. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that triangulation enhances credibility by validating findings across multiple sources and perspectives. Additionally, the analysis was informed by established theoretical frameworks, including Banks’ Multicultural Education Theory, Deardorff’s Intercultural Competence Framework, Allport’s Contact Theory, and social cohesion perspectives developed by OECD and UNESCO. These frameworks provided conceptual guidance for interpreting relationships among multicultural education, intercultural engagement, and social harmony.

The final stage involved synthesizing the identified themes into a conceptual model termed the **Multicultural Harmony Development Framework (MHDF)**. The framework proposes that multicultural education serves as the primary educational input, intercultural competence and inclusive citizenship function as mediating processes, and social harmony represents the ultimate societal outcome. Through this synthesis, the study offers a comprehensive theoretical explanation of how educational institutions in Malaysia can strengthen harmonious relationships and social cohesion through intentional multicultural educational practices. The framework contributes to the growing body of literature on multicultural education while providing practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and institutions committed to promoting social harmony in diverse societies.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study demonstrate that multicultural education plays a significant role in promoting social harmony within Malaysia's multicultural society. The literature reviewed consistently indicates that multicultural education serves not only as an educational approach for recognizing cultural diversity but also as a strategic mechanism for fostering mutual understanding, social cohesion, intercultural competence, and inclusive citizenship. In a country characterized by ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity, educational institutions function as critical spaces where individuals learn to interact constructively across differences. The evidence suggests that multicultural education contributes substantially to the development of harmonious relationships among diverse communities by encouraging respect, tolerance, and collaborative engagement. As Malaysia continues to experience social transformation driven by globalization, technological advancement, and demographic change, multicultural education remains increasingly important for sustaining peaceful coexistence and national unity.

One of the most significant findings is that multicultural education strengthens intercultural understanding among students from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural understanding refers to the ability to recognize, appreciate, and respect cultural differences while maintaining constructive relationships with individuals from diverse communities. According to Banks (2019), multicultural education promotes cultural awareness by exposing students to multiple perspectives, histories, and traditions that may differ from their own experiences. The reviewed studies indicate that students who participate in multicultural learning environments develop greater appreciation for diversity and become more willing to engage positively with individuals from other cultural groups. In Malaysia, where

educational institutions often bring together students from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities, multicultural educational practices provide valuable opportunities for intercultural interaction and learning. These experiences help reduce misconceptions and foster positive attitudes toward diversity, thereby strengthening the foundations of social harmony.

The findings further reveal that multicultural education contributes significantly to social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to the strength of social relationships, trust, solidarity, and cooperation among members of society. OECD (2023) emphasizes that socially cohesive societies are characterized by inclusion, mutual trust, and active participation among diverse groups. The literature reviewed suggests that multicultural education enhances social cohesion by creating opportunities for meaningful interactions among students from different backgrounds. Collaborative learning activities, intercultural discussions, and group projects encourage students to work together toward common goals while appreciating diverse perspectives. Through these interactions, students develop relationships based on mutual respect and understanding, which contribute to stronger social bonds and collective identity. In the Malaysian context, social cohesion is particularly important because harmonious intergroup relationships are essential for maintaining national stability and unity.

Another important finding concerns the role of multicultural education in reducing prejudice and discrimination. Diverse societies may experience social tensions when stereotypes, biases, and misunderstandings remain unchallenged. According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2011), positive intergroup contact significantly reduces prejudice when individuals interact under supportive conditions characterized by cooperation and equal status. The reviewed studies indicate that multicultural educational environments facilitate such interactions by encouraging students to engage with diverse peers and explore cultural differences in constructive ways. Through exposure to multiple perspectives and shared learning experiences, students become more aware of the experiences and challenges faced by others. This increased awareness promotes empathy and reduces negative stereotypes that may otherwise contribute to social divisions. Consequently, multicultural education functions as an important tool for preventing discrimination and fostering harmonious relationships among diverse groups.

The findings also highlight the significance of intercultural competence as a mediating factor linking multicultural education and social harmony. Intercultural competence encompasses the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective

interaction across cultural boundaries. Deardorff (2020) identifies respect, openness, empathy, adaptability, and effective communication as essential components of intercultural competence. The literature reviewed consistently demonstrates that multicultural educational practices facilitate the development of these competencies through culturally responsive curricula, collaborative learning, and intercultural engagement. Students who possess strong intercultural competencies are more likely to navigate cultural differences constructively, resolve misunderstandings peacefully, and contribute positively to diverse communities. In Malaysia's multicultural environment, such competencies are particularly valuable because they enable individuals to participate effectively in increasingly diverse social and professional contexts.

Another important finding is that multicultural education promotes inclusive citizenship. Inclusive citizenship emphasizes equal participation, respect for diversity, democratic engagement, and shared responsibility within society. According to Veugelers (2019), multicultural education supports citizenship development by encouraging learners to understand both their individual cultural identities and their responsibilities as members of a broader democratic community. The reviewed studies suggest that multicultural educational experiences encourage students to develop civic values such as fairness, cooperation, tolerance, and social responsibility. These values contribute directly to social harmony because they foster a sense of collective belonging while respecting cultural differences. In Malaysia, where national unity remains a central policy objective, inclusive citizenship education provides an important foundation for strengthening social cohesion and harmonious coexistence.

The analysis further reveals that multicultural education contributes to the development of empathy and social responsibility among learners. Empathy enables individuals to understand and appreciate the experiences, perspectives, and emotions of others. Research suggests that empathy plays a critical role in promoting harmonious social relationships because it encourages compassion, understanding, and prosocial behavior. The literature reviewed indicates that multicultural educational practices expose students to diverse narratives and experiences, thereby expanding their capacity for empathy and perspective-taking. Students who engage in multicultural learning are more likely to recognize shared human experiences despite cultural differences and demonstrate greater concern for social justice and inclusion. These outcomes contribute positively to social harmony by strengthening interpersonal relationships and encouraging cooperative behavior.

A particularly significant contribution of this study is the identification of the **Multicultural Harmony Development Process (MHDP)** as a novel conceptual mechanism explaining how multicultural education promotes social harmony. The findings suggest that multicultural education does not influence social harmony directly. Instead, educational experiences first foster intercultural competence, empathy, cultural understanding, and inclusive citizenship. These capacities subsequently encourage positive intergroup interactions, social participation, and collaborative engagement. Through these processes, harmonious social relationships emerge and become sustained over time. The Multicultural Harmony Development Process therefore provides a comprehensive explanation of how educational interventions translate into broader societal outcomes related to peace, cohesion, and inclusion. This conceptual contribution extends existing scholarship by clarifying the pathways connecting multicultural education with harmonious social development.

The findings additionally emphasize the importance of educational institutions as agents of social harmony. Schools and universities function not only as sites of academic learning but also as environments where social values, attitudes, and relationships are developed. According to Gay (2018), culturally responsive educational practices create inclusive environments that support both academic achievement and social development. The reviewed literature indicates that institutions implementing multicultural educational approaches are better positioned to foster positive intercultural interactions and inclusive learning environments. Teachers play a particularly important role by modeling respect for diversity, facilitating dialogue, and creating opportunities for collaborative learning. Educational leadership and institutional commitment further strengthen the effectiveness of multicultural initiatives by ensuring that inclusion and diversity remain central organizational priorities.

The analysis also highlights the role of community engagement in reinforcing the outcomes of multicultural education. Educational institutions that collaborate with families, community organizations, and cultural groups create broader networks of support that extend multicultural learning beyond the classroom. Such partnerships provide students with opportunities to apply intercultural competencies in real-world contexts while strengthening relationships among different communities. These experiences contribute to social harmony by promoting shared understanding and collective responsibility for community well-being.

Despite the positive contributions of multicultural education, several challenges remain. The literature identifies continuing concerns related to ethnic stereotypes,

social inequalities, political polarization, and disparities in educational opportunities. Furthermore, the effectiveness of multicultural education depends on sustained policy support, teacher preparation, and institutional commitment. Without adequate resources and strategic implementation, multicultural initiatives may fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Therefore, ongoing investment in multicultural educational programs and inclusive policies remains essential for promoting long-term social harmony.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that multicultural education serves as a powerful catalyst for social harmony in Malaysia. Through the promotion of intercultural understanding, social cohesion, empathy, inclusive citizenship, and positive intergroup relationships, multicultural education contributes significantly to peaceful coexistence and national unity. The proposed Multicultural Harmony Development Process provides a valuable framework for understanding these relationships and offers practical guidance for educators and policymakers seeking to strengthen harmony in diverse societies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the role of multicultural education in promoting social harmony within Malaysia's multicultural society. The findings demonstrate that multicultural education serves as a critical educational strategy for fostering peaceful coexistence, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting national unity in a context characterized by significant ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. As Malaysia continues to navigate the opportunities and challenges associated with multiculturalism, educational institutions play an increasingly important role in preparing individuals to engage constructively with diversity while contributing positively to society.

The study found that multicultural education promotes social harmony by enhancing intercultural understanding, reducing prejudice, strengthening social cohesion, and encouraging inclusive citizenship. Through exposure to diverse perspectives and collaborative learning experiences, students develop greater appreciation for cultural diversity and become more capable of interacting respectfully with individuals from different backgrounds. These experiences contribute to the development of empathy, mutual trust, and positive intergroup relationships, all of which represent essential foundations of harmonious societies.

Intercultural competence emerged as a particularly important mechanism connecting multicultural education with social harmony. Competencies such as cultural awareness, empathy, adaptability, and effective communication enable

individuals to navigate cultural differences constructively and participate meaningfully within diverse communities. The study further revealed that multicultural educational practices encourage inclusive citizenship by fostering democratic values, social responsibility, and active participation in community life. These outcomes contribute directly to national integration and collective well-being.

A major contribution of this research is the development of the Multicultural Harmony Development Process, which explains how multicultural educational experiences are transformed into harmonious social outcomes through the mediating influences of intercultural competence, empathy, cultural understanding, and inclusive citizenship. This framework provides a comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms through which education contributes to social harmony and offers a valuable foundation for future research and policy development.

In conclusion, multicultural education represents a powerful and sustainable approach to promoting social harmony in Malaysia. By fostering inclusion, understanding, respect, and cooperation among diverse communities, multicultural education strengthens the social fabric of society and supports the development of peaceful, cohesive, and resilient communities. Future studies should empirically examine the proposed framework and explore its application across different educational and cultural settings.

## REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gorski, P. C. (2019). Avoiding racial equity detours. *Educational Leadership*, 76(7), 56–61.
- Hall, P. A., & Lamont, M. (2013). *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leask, B. (2015). *Internationalizing the Curriculum*. Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- OECD. (2023). *PISA 2022 Results Volume II: Learning During and From Disruption*. OECD Publishing.

- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2011). *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact*. Psychology Press.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339.
- UNESCO. (2023). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Veugelers, W. (2019). Education for democratic intercultural citizenship. *Educational Review, 71*(4), 448–463.
- Xiao, Y., & Watson, M. (2019). Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review. *Journal of Planning Education and Research, 39*(1), 93–112.
- Yusof, N., Hassan, A., Jamaluddin, S., & Harun, N. (2021). Multicultural education and social integration in Malaysian schools. *International Journal of Educational Development, 83*, 102390.