



## The Impact of a Multicultural Environment on the National Identity Among Students at the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v12i10.7207>

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### Abstract

People who live distant from their native land maintain their feeling of belonging to their home country. This research investigates Indonesian students at SIKL as they develop their national identity through experiences in a multicultural educational environment. These children encounter both advantages and difficulties from their worldwide exposure because they live among different languages and cultures. This study is a qualitative descriptive research using observation, interviews, and documentation as the main data collection techniques. The findings indicate that students develop stronger Indonesian identity through school practices such as the use of batik clothing, Bahasa Indonesian language, national holiday celebrations, and traditional songs. The results also show that teachers, parents, and community members together establish meaningful links between students and their homeland. These educational strategies help students maintain their national identity while developing pride in their cultural heritage. The study concludes that education integrated with daily traditions plays a significant role in strengthening identity development among Indonesian children abroad, ensuring that their sense of belonging to the homeland remains strong despite their multicultural surroundings.

**Keywords:** *National Identity; Multicultural; Indonesian School; Cultural Education*

### Introduction

Globalization has resulted in a world that is increasingly interconnected. The increase in cross-border population movement includes labor migration and family relocation, leading to the establishment of substantial diaspora communities. There are a great number of the citizens of Indonesia who live abroad especially in Malaysia now. Such a multicultural environment has a significant influence on the national identity and personality of Indonesian children who live in that region. Cultural barriers that the Indonesian children face in Malaysia are not limited to learning the language or adapting to social habits. Such children are also exposed to other deep levels of culture such as morality, ethics and core values of Indonesia. They may lose a connection with their country in case they never develop a meaningful interaction with their cultural inheritance and nationhood in the course of time. is at the risk of eventually

interfering with their patriotism, reducing their love towards the nation, and their opinions regarding national pride and power (Suryaningsi et al., 2025).

The study by Zuhriyah et al. (2025) found out that Indonesian children in other settings are at the risk of confusing identity especially when they lack structured programs that enhance their cultural backgrounds. Their studies underline that constant intercultural interaction which has not reinforced national identity can lead to impoverishment of relations with the culture. National identity refers to the collective self-relation of a nation. According to Ubaedillah (2016), national identity is an identity of cultural values of a nation that differentiates them amongst other other countries. According to Rahayu (2007), a number of factors are identified to comprise national identity that includes ethnicity, language, religion, national culture, territory and ideological basis of state. Along with that, national identity may be separated into three main parts:

- a. Fundamental identity, which includes Pancasila;
- b. Instrumental identity, which comprises the 1945 Constitution, the Indonesian language, the national anthem (Indonesia Raya), and the national flag;
- c. Natural identity, which encompasses ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

For Indonesian children living abroad, continuous exposure to foreign cultures significantly shapes the development of their identity. The challenge of balancing their heritage culture with the surrounding new culture becomes increasingly apparent and often triggers concerns about the preservation of cultural and national identity (Putraedi et al., 2025; Nurmanita et al., 2024). According to Dermawan et al. (2023), many Indonesian students in Malaysia experience internal conflict in balancing local values with their Indonesian identity, especially in relation to Pancasila and national pride. Their findings emphasize the importance of schools as spaces for nurturing national identity through structured learning.

National identity serves as a foundational element for individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and providing direction for a nation's future. For Indonesian children living overseas, maintaining their national identity is crucial for several reasons. First, it ensures their continued connection to the cultural roots and historical legacy of Indonesia, helping prevent cultural erosion or identity confusion. Second, Fuadah A. & Sibawaihi (2025) highlight that national identity is a good source of values and character because of the development of personality based on self-identification. This will give children a feeling of respect towards themselves, others in a beating of the multicultural context. Third, enhancing national identity makes it possible to be cultural ambassadors of Indonesia in the international arena- to show how rich the heritage is, yet retain themselves as Indonesian people (Ahsani et al., 2024).

Nabilah et al. (2023) proved that interactive learning materials are very useful in increasing the national awareness of the students, in particular, the children of migrant workers in Malaysia. Such devices not only enhanced the knowledge but also showed the emotional identification with the Indonesian symbols and values. The study is carried out at the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) that is a special school functioning in the multicultural context of Malaysia. SIKL is the second home to Indonesian students that they not only communicate with students hailing to different parts of Indonesia but also learn about other cultural aspects within Malaysian society and other parts of the world. SIKL has a crucial role to play in maintaining the values in Indonesia and it has a personal duty of ensuring that it can transform character of students through academic and extra-curriculum exercises. Its setting is a social laboratory that is good to see how students negotiate their identities, how they adopt to the multiethnic culture and how they embrace the value that Indonesian share and at the same time have a sense of national identity. Suyahman et al. (2023) also find schools like SIKL crucial in defining the migrant childrens identity by setting up counseling sessions and cultural programs enabling emotional attachment to the Indonesian origins.

Within the above context, this study is proposed to determine how the process of building and maintaining national identity might depend on the experience of a multicultural environment in the case of students attending the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur. In that way, the major objective of the

presented research is to investigate and examine the impact of multicultural interactions on the development of the sense of national identity among students at SIKL.

## **Method**

The study is aimed at developing insight about whether the multicultural situation contributes to formation and maintenance of national identity of students in the environment of social diversity namely in the case of the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur. Qualitative research is the learning technique, which can be applied to understand more about the social problem through the perspectives of people, what they went through, and what predicaments they find themselves. It attempts to comprehend what leads to behaviors and what the people derive meaning out of their lives. The field of study is concerned with how individuals construct and interpret the world around them and in many cases such research entails complicated concepts (Creswell, 2014). Data collection methods To obtain a clear picture of the topic, the study will employ a mixed method of data collection, which entails the use of various techniques like observation, interviews and document analysis. The process of data analysis in this qualitative descriptive study will follow a systematic path constituting data reduction mode where the main topics and trends as observed will be identified based on observations, semi-structured interviews, and analyses of the documents. The reduced data shall then be narratively or pictorially displayed so as to help understand better.

Verify that the Conclusions will come out as part of an inductive process i.e. straight out of what has been summarized and the accuracy thereof will always be checked back on the raw data itself to ensure a strong checking on the accuracy thereof. The study will use source triangulation to help strengthen data credibility since it involves triangulation across the three sources of information which are students, teachers and parents, comparing the information obtained with the information gathered in the school documents to match them up. Moreover, conceptual validation shall be performed by matching the empirical findings with some of the existing theories including that of existence of more than one kind of national identity, multicultural dynamic and development of individuals in an international learning environment. It is an integrated framework of analytical ideas that attempt to offer effective and penetrating knowledge of how the multicultural comingling within the Indonesian School Kuala Lumpur influences the perception of the students as being nationally minded.

## **Result**

National identity is not just learnt in the curriculum in multicultural education context, particularly in the overseas Indonesian schools but it is also inculcated in the day to day life and activities in the learning society and the values that one lives by. This is the presentation of the research findings based on interviews in the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) with teachers, parents and students in addition with idea of the related theoretical views and literature. Findings point out the process that students working in the multicultural environment negotiate their Indonesian national identity, save, and manifest the own identity. Using descriptive qualitative approach to frame the data, the qualitative data was analyzed in themes and categorized into five key areas of discourse; daily portrayal of national identity, effects of peer and cultural relations, responsibility of the school in molding identity, parent and community involvement and identity development by the students in a multicultural environment. These reflections provide an overall picture of how identity is not such a fixed thing but rather a dynamic, dynamic and continuous process both used by structure and agency.

### *a. Expression of National Identity in Daily School Life*

At the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), material practices within the school are well orchestrated in order to mirror and reaffirm national identification with Indonesia. They are dressed in uniform like Indonesian schools, i.e. white shirt and red skirts or trousers, batik, scout and sport uniforms.

Such uniformity cultivates a powerful aesthetic and symbolic orientation to the nation, the homeland. The required language of study and communication in the school is Bahasa Indonesia. Although a substantial number of the students use Malay or English more often, as it is their home and social setting, they also learn to understand and apply Bahasa Indonesia, mostly with the help of systematic study and being able to communicate with their teachers and peers in the language on everyday basis.

Flags ceremonies are conducted frequently mostly on national significant days like Indonesian Independence Day (August 17), National Education Day and Kartini Day. These are singing of the national anthem, Saluting of the Indonesian flag, and performance of cultures. They are the sources of emotional support of patriotism and national pride. Moreover, the school has salaman - a handshaking between students and teachers that is conducted every morning. In addition to Indonesian courtesy, this habit of culture helps create emotional ties between the students and the educator.

The students are also supposed to sing in Indonesian national songs including Indonesia Raya and also some of the islands in the region. This singing activity is a normal practice every time there is an assembly and during cultural festivals which creates emotional connection to Indonesia and creates awareness of the cultural diversity in Indonesia. This immersive context is in line with McCaig (1992) and Kim (2008), who coin the term internationally mobile children as “global nomads”, “cultural chameleons”, and “third culture kids”. Such students find themselves straddling between cultures and thus, develop a mixed self-identity. In that regard, SIKL plays the role of cultural anchor that enables the students to build and maintain the Indonesian identity in a foreign context.

#### *b. Influence of Peer Interactions and Cultural Exposure*

The environment of the students participating in SIKL is highly multicultural. At school, they are mainly socializing with other Indonesian students of different ethnicities like, Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, Sundanese, and many more. Nevertheless, they are often exposed to the Malay speaking and their peers as well as the Malaysian culture practiced generally outside school. It is a positive and a negative thing that has this dual exposure. On the one hand, it encourages openness to change and diversity, tolerance and respect of individuals. Learners become interculturally competent and value diversity. However on the other hand, there are also students especially those who have been staying in Malaysia since birth who are more oriented to Malaysian pop culture and are now familiar with the Malaysian national anthem even than in Indonesia. This is a sign of cultural change, particularly language preference.

However, when it comes to school, students always note that they feel more comfortable, emotionally attached to their Indonesian peers. SIKL feels at home since the background and values are similar to the members of the organization. SIKL members are respected and guided to celebrate Indonesian-ness. One can observe these characteristics among students of SIKL because they are able to relate to the cultural conditions of the new environment, yet at the same time they are proud of their Indonesian nationality.

#### *c. Role of the School in Shaping National Identity*

SIKL is the key to preservation and reinforcement of the national identity of the students. Civic values of tolerance, cooperation (gotong royong), and love of the homeland are taught through such subjects as Pendidikan Pancasila, Bahasa Indonesia, and Indonesian history respectively. Educators make concerted efforts to relate these values to the experiences of students by making them inculcate abstract principles in practical aspects. Integration of culture is also accomplished in the Project to Strengthen Pancasila Student Profile (P5) which includes such themes as the “Cultural Diversity” and “Sustainable Living”. Such topics are investigated by students during collaborative projects, mini exhibitions, conventional arts and storytelling that allows reflecting the pluralistic Indonesian society. Indonesian dance and gamelan are also among the extracurricular programs at its center. Students also entertain in their significant festivals such as Kartini Day and they are welcomed to provide the Indonesian cultures in

other occasions such as presidential visit and street performances in Genting Highlands. The experiences make the students proud of their cultural backgrounds and the school establishes itself as a leading operator of cultural diplomacy.

*d. Parental and Community Involvement*

Parents and the wider Indonesian diaspora community serve as important co-educators in reinforcing national identity. Many parents deliberately use Bahasa Indonesia at home and introduce their children to Indonesian cuisine, such as rawon, soto, or traditional snacks like kue lapis. These daily practices allow children to associate everyday experiences with Indonesian culture. Family visits to Indonesia are also utilized to introduce children to their hometowns, local languages, and traditional customs. Although home-based cultural education may not be as structured as school programs, these real-life exposures form emotional connections that contribute to children's identity development. The community also plays a significant role in organizing cultural activities, religious celebrations, and collaborative programs with the Indonesian Embassy, further deepening students' connection to their roots.

*e. Challenges and Conflicts of Identity*

The multicultural environment poses unique challenges to students' national identity. Language is the most significant barrier, as many students are more accustomed to speaking Malay or English in daily life. As a result, their fluency in Bahasa Indonesia especially in reading and singing national songs can be limited. This identity conflict is typical of students described by Useem et al. (1963) as "third culture kids" young people who grow up outside their country of origin and form hybrid cultural identities. While this can result in confusion or detachment, the school and family system together function as a buffer, guiding students toward a balanced identity.

Some students, for example, mentioned that they are more familiar with Malaysia's national anthem or Malay-language media content than with Indonesian patriotic songs. This reflects how easily cultural identity can shift under environmental influence. Teachers and parents respond to these challenges with consistent and creative approaches. Teachers use contextual teaching methods, storytelling, and national projects to reconnect students with Indonesian culture. Parents encourage Bahasa Indonesia use at home and promote Indonesian values through food, media, and storytelling. Although the challenges are ongoing, this collaborative strategy has shown success in maintaining students' awareness and pride in their Indonesian heritage.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that the formation of national identity among Indonesian students at the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) is a dynamic and ongoing process, rather than something static. National identity is formed through the integration of formal practices at school, cultural habits in the family environment, and interaction with the multicultural community in which they live. In other words, identity is not merely taught through the curriculum, but also instilled in daily life through language, symbols, customs, and cultural activities. Daily practices at SIKL, such as wearing school uniforms, communicating in Indonesian, flag ceremonies, and greeting teachers every morning, have a meaning beyond mere routine. All of these become symbols that strengthen students' emotional attachment to their homeland. These routines form a "cultural anchor" that maintains the continuity of national identity even though they live abroad. This aligns with the views of McCaig (1992) and Kim (2008) regarding "third culture kids" who grow up in cross-cultural environments and must negotiate their identities. In this context, SIKL serves as the main pillar ensuring that Indonesian identity remains firmly rooted amidst global influences.

Student interaction with the Malaysian environment also has a dual impact. Exposure to local and global cultures broadens horizons, fosters tolerance, and develops intercultural competencies that are

useful in the era of globalization. However, excessive exposure can weaken students' closeness to Indonesian culture, particularly in terms of language and national symbols. Some students, for example, are more familiar with the Malaysian national anthem or local popular culture than with the Indonesian national anthem. This phenomenon shows that national identity is highly vulnerable to environmental influences and requires consistent reinforcement.

SIKL serves not only as an educational institution but also as an agent of cultural diplomacy. The curriculum, which includes Pancasila Education, Indonesian Language, and Indonesian History, along with the P5 program emphasizing cultural diversity, positions the school as both a learning space and a vehicle for representing Indonesia abroad. Extracurricular activities, such as traditional dance, gamelan, and cultural festivals, enhance students' pride in their national heritage while introducing Indonesian culture to the Malaysian public. Thus, the school serves a dual purpose: strengthening students' identity and representing Indonesian culture to the international community. In addition to schools, Indonesian diaspora families and communities are also important partners in the process of shaping national identity. Parents maintain the Indonesian language at home, introduce traditional foods, and make regular visits to their homeland to introduce their children to their hometown, dialects, and customs. Meanwhile, the diaspora community collaborates with schools and the Indonesian Embassy to organize cultural celebrations and national activities. The synergy between schools, families, and communities forms a holistic identity-strengthening ecosystem, enabling students to maintain cultural ties with their homeland despite living abroad.

Challenges persist in the form of language barriers, the dominance of Malaysian popular culture, and a tendency toward hybrid identity formation. These conditions indicate that national identity cannot survive automatically but must be nurtured through adaptive strategies. Teachers employ contextual methods, storytelling, and cultural projects, while parents instill national values through daily communication, food, and media. These collaborative efforts demonstrate that national identity can be maintained even within a multicultural environment. Thus, this discussion confirms that the national identity of SIKL students is formed through a combination of formal and informal strategies, as well as negotiations between attachment to Indonesian culture and openness to global culture. The identity that emerges from this process not only fosters a sense of pride in the nation, but also equips students with the capacity to become cultural ambassadors who are able to represent Indonesia's richness at the international level.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative descriptive study demonstrates that the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) serves as a critical space for cultivating and preserving national identity among Indonesian students living in a multicultural environment. These students, many of whom were born or raised outside Indonesia navigate daily life surrounded by cultural influences from Malaysia and the broader international community. While this environment fosters openness, flexibility, and intercultural competence, it also presents the risk of cultural displacement, particularly in language use and affiliation with foreign customs.

Nevertheless, the findings show that national identity can be meaningfully strengthened through consistent, collaborative, and culturally responsive efforts within the school, home, and community settings. SIKL has been effective in creating a sense of Indonesian values through an in-built methodology; one that is expressed by speaking the Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia), orchestrated national holidays, guided celebration by daily local culture, with cultural ways such as the salaman culture, and national material in both studies and extra-curricular activities. Such practices give students a tangible definition of being Indonesia and not be dependent on the prevailing culture of the host country.

Another basis that helps to keep Indonesian identity is the role of parents who continue to preserve the habit at home by cooking national foods, using the national language at home, and arranging frequent

visits to Indonesia. These experiences enable the children to develop emotional and cultural ties, which are used to support what they consume in school. Similarly, the wider Indonesian community in Malaysia, such as embassies and dispersion groups, has a contribution in that it provides the society with public places of cultural performances, worship, and social festivities. All this coupled creates the atmosphere of continuity and pride of national identity even as students are forced to adapt and respond to different cultural environments

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