



Teachers' Challenges in Developing Children's Character in Multicultural and Inclusive Classroom

Komang Dendi Krisna Murti¹, Ni Nyoman Padmadewi², Luh Gd Rahayu Budiarta³

Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Indonesia¹⁻³

Email Korespondensi: dendi@student.undiksha.ac.id, nym.padmawati@undiksha.ac.id, rahayu.budiarta@undiksha.ac.id

Article received: 05 Mei 2026, Review process: 12 Mei 2026

Article Accepted : 29 Mei 2026, Article published: 18 Juni 2026

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method to develop children's character in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. A qualitative approach with a case study design was conducted at Singaraja Montessori School in the Octopus class. Among the participants in this study were two teachers who teach in the Octopus class. Research data were collected through three methods: classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Then, they were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The research findings indicate three challenges. First, teachers face challenges in understanding the characteristics and needs of new students. Second, there are challenges in managing diverse classes. Third, teachers have limited experience in inclusive education. This study confirms that developing children's character in diverse classes requires continuous observation, flexible classroom management, and teacher readiness to respond to the diverse needs of students.

Keywords: Montessori Method, Character Development, Multicultural, Inclusive, Teacher Challenges.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam menerapkan metode Montessori untuk mengembangkan karakter anak di kelas multikultural dan inklusif. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus dilakukan di Singaraja Montessori School pada kelas Octopus. Di antara partisipan pada penelitian ini terdapat dua guru yang mengajar di kelas Octopus. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui tiga cara, yaitu observasi kelas, wawancara semi-struktur, dan analisis dokumen yang kemudian dianalisis dengan model analisis Miles dan Huberman yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan terdapat tiga tantangan. Pertama, guru menghadapi tantangan dalam memahami karakteristik dan kebutuhan siswa baru. Kedua, terdapat tantangan dalam mengelola kelas yang beragam. Ketiga, guru yang memiliki keterbatasan pengalaman dalam pendidikan inklusif. Pada penelitian ini terdapat penegasan bahwa dalam mengembangkan karakter anak di kelas yang beragam dibutuhkan observasi berkelanjutan, pengelolaan kelas yang fleksibel, dan juga kesiapan guru dalam merespons berbagai kebutuhan siswa yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: Metode Montessori, Pengembangan Karakter, Multikultural, Inklusif, Tantangan Guru.

INTRODUCTION

21st-century education faces the challenges of globalization, cultural diversity, and changing moral and social values. In this century, schools are no longer expected to improve students' academic achievement but also to develop children's character, such as mutual respect and appreciation for others, responsibility, cooperation, independence, and self-control. This issue is relevant in Indonesia, as a multicultural country characterized by diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, and social backgrounds (Jayadi et al., 2022). Therefore, education plays a crucial role in helping students live harmoniously amidst this diversity and in developing positive values necessary for social life (Machmud & Alim, 2018).

The challenges of character development in children become more complex in a multicultural and inclusive classroom. Multicultural education emphasizes the importance of respecting all differences, including differences in culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and social background (Ambarudin, 2016). Inclusive education is education that provides equal learning opportunities for all students without exception, including students with special needs, enabling them to learn alongside their peers in the same classroom (Hassanein et al., 2021; Sahli Lozano et al., 2022).

In character development, the Montessori method is highly relevant because it emphasizes independence, freedom within limits, hands-on learning, practical life, and a structured environment (Montessori, 1912). Montessori activities encourage children to make choices, complete tasks independently, interact with peers, and develop a sense of respect and responsibility through daily routines. This method aims to support children's holistic development and foster responsible, independent individuals (Scott & Myers, 2021). However, diverse classrooms, such as multicultural and inclusive ones, can certainly present special challenges for teachers.

Singaraja Montessori School is a relevant school context for examining the challenges of a multicultural and inclusive classroom environment. Initial observations indicate that students at this school are diverse, with diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages, and nationalities, as well as students with special needs such as Down syndrome, autism, speech delays, and dyslexia. Furthermore, the school also implements a multi-age classroom system. This presents challenges for teachers in managing the emotional and behavioral differences of each student and consistently developing character values in daily activities.

Various previous studies have discussed the Montessori method, inclusive education, multicultural education, and character education, but within different classroom contexts. Most studies tend to examine these issues separately, focusing on the contribution of the Montessori method to cognitive and social development, as well as the challenges of inclusive education in the general school context. For example, Chairunnisa & Rismita (2022) study examined educational challenges in inclusive schools. Furthermore, penelitian Yusnan (2022) study examined how children's character can be developed through habituation. Moreover, Yulia et al. (2022), examined Montessori components that can support character development in children. No research has examined the challenges teachers face in developing

children's character through the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive classrooms. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the various challenges teachers face in implementing the Montessori method in developing children's character in multicultural and inclusive classrooms at Singaraja Montessori School.

Montessori Method

The Montessori Method is an educational approach developed by Maria Montessori, which views children as active learners who develop through concrete evidence, direct experience, independence, and freedom within structured boundaries (Lillard et al., 2017; Montessori, 1912). Teachers play a crucial role in this method as observers and facilitators, preparing the learning environment and guiding children according to their developmental needs, talents, and interests. In its learning, this method emphasizes the use of multisensory media, practical life activities, and independent exploration, which are used to help children develop independence, self-confidence, responsibility, and self-control (Azhari et al., 2024; Mulyani & Anugrahana, 2023). In a prepared Montessori class, it provides an opportunity for children to develop character values through social interactions, learning experiences, and daily routines (Kocabaş & Bavlı, 2022).

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education was developed by James A. Banks in 2004 to create a more equitable education system that values diversity. The emphasis in this education is on all students having equal learning opportunities regardless of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or other backgrounds (Banks, 2014). This education helps students understand their identity while appreciating the perspectives of other cultures. This, in turn, helps students cultivate mutual respect, appreciation, and acceptance of differences. The concept of multicultural education has five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is defined as an educational approach that provides equal learning opportunities to all students, including those with special needs. According to Ainscow, (2005) inclusive education ensures that all children can participate, are valued, and feel part of a community, not simply placing students in the same classroom. Loreman, (2007) emphasizes several key elements for effective inclusive education, such as the importance of positive attitudes, supportive policies, flexible learning methods, community involvement, reflection, training, and adequate resources. Therefore, inclusive education focuses on acceptance, participation, equity, and support so that all students can develop optimally.

Character Education

According to Licklona, (1991) character education has three components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Moral knowing encompasses moral awareness, knowledge of moral values, the ability to understand others'

perspectives, moral reasoning, and self-understanding (Dalmeri, 2014). Moral feeling relates to conscience, empathy, humility, and self-control. Moral action encompasses the ability and habit of performing good behavior or actions. Character education is used to shape positive habits through learning, habituation, role modeling, and school environmental support (Damariswara et al., 2021; Handayani & Apdasuli, 2025; Licklona, 2012).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach, emphasizing context, existence, experience, perspective, meaning, and subjectivity to explore and interpret the complexity of social phenomena (Lim, 2025). This approach employed a descriptive case study design conducted at Singaraja Montessori School, focusing on the Octopus class. This design was used to identify the challenges faced by teachers. The subjects of this study were two teachers in the Octopus class. The research object was the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method in developing children's character. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

Data collection

The data collection uses the theory of (Miles & Huberman, 2014) which identifies three methods for data collection: observation, interviews, and documents. Observation used non-participatory observation, where researchers directly observed, followed by semi-structured interviews to obtain more in-depth data, and document analysis to obtain supporting data. Data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman, (2014) model. This involved three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To avoid bias during the research process, all data obtained must be verified. This verification aims to examine the data to determine its accuracy, internal validity, and reliability, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of the research results. According to Lincoln & Guba, (1985), four criteria of trustworthiness should be considered in a qualitative study, such as Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method to develop children's character in multicultural and inclusive classes. Based on data analysis, there are three challenges faced by teachers, namely: (1) difficulty in understanding the characteristics and individual needs of new students, (2) difficulty in managing diverse classes, and (3) limited experience of teachers in dealing with students with special needs.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Developing Children's Character

Based on observation data, interviews, and document analysis that have been carried out regarding the application of the Montessori method in developing children's character in multicultural and inclusive classes, there are several

challenges. These challenges are related to the presence of students who have diversity, both in terms of background and students with special needs.

C1. Difficulty Understanding the Characteristics of New Students

T1 stated:

"Tantangan terbesar yaitu ketika terdapat suatu siswa baru yang harus dipahami lagi karakternya. Seperti harus mengecek lagi gaya belajarnya, model pembelajaran yang cocok dengan tipikal siswa atau juga karakter siswa. Proses adaptasi ini membutuhkan waktu observasi individual yang dilakukan sebelum menentukan strategi yang tepat. Selain itu, diperlukan kesabaran dan kemampuan observasi yang kuat."

"The biggest challenge arises when there is a new student whose personality needs to be understood. For example, you have to reassess their learning style and determine which teaching methods are best suited to their personality or learning style. This adaptation process requires individual observation before deciding on the right strategy. In addition, it requires patience and strong observational skills."

This question indicates that, before teachers provide appropriate guidance, teachers need to understand the characteristics and needs of students. With the diversity that exists in the classroom, teachers cannot provide all students with the same approach. Therefore, teachers need to observe each student's behavior, habits, learning styles, and needs. Based on these findings, it is related to the principles of the Montessori method, which emphasizes the teacher's role as an observer and guide for the child's learning process according to the rhythm of each child's development (Montessori, 1912; Roemer, 1999). Research by Rahmawati et al., (2021) emphasizes that inclusive classroom learning must be adapted to the needs of each student.

C2. Difficulties in Managing Diverse Classrooms

The second challenge teachers face is managing a classroom of diverse students. In this environment, teachers need to ensure a safe, comfortable, inclusive, and anti-bullying environment.

T1 stated:

"Kesulitan dalam mengelola kelas yang kompleks seperti ini adalah sulit untuk mengelola kelas sendiri, terlebih lagi tidak memiliki background untuk mengajar di kelas inklusi dan beragam, serta harus bekerja ekstra untuk memahami kebutuhan semua yang beragam dan anak berkebutuhan khusus, serta mengatur dinamika keberagaman yang ada seperti budaya dan bahasa. Sebagai tambahan, juga harus memastikan bahwa perhatian kepada anak berkebutuhan khusus tidak membuat anak lain merasa diabaikan."

"The challenge in managing a complex classroom like this is that it's difficult to manage the class on my own, especially since I lack experience teaching in inclusive and diverse classrooms. I have to go the extra mile to understand the diverse needs of all the students, including those with special needs, and manage the dynamics of diversity, such as cultural and linguistic differences. In addition, I must ensure that the attention given to students with special needs does not make the other students feel neglected."

This statement demonstrates that teachers must be able to balance attention with all students. Not only do students with special needs require more assistance, but other students must also feel cared for. This relates to Ainscow (2005) and Banks (2014) who explain that inclusive education emphasizes the acceptance, participation, and support of all students without exception, regardless of their background, culture, language, ethnicity, race, religion, social status, or special needs.

T2 added:

“Tantangannya terletak pada perbedaan kemampuan, bahasa, dan kebutuhan khusus, yang menuntut penyesuaian terus-menerus. Selain itu, ada juga kendala waktu. Beberapa siswa dengan kebutuhan khusus membutuhkan waktu lebih lama karena mereka memerlukan pengulangan dan dukungan agar tetap fokus selama kegiatan belajar.”

“The challenges lie in the differences in abilities, languages, and special needs, which require constant adaptation. Then there is the time constraint. Some students with special needs require more time because they need repetition and support to maintain their focus during learning activities.”

T2's statement reinforces that, given the diversity of students, teachers are required to effectively manage their classes, including adjusting time, instruction, and support. This situation also requires teachers to carefully allocate their time and attention to ensure that all children feel they receive equitable attention.

C.3 Lack of Teachers' Experience with Students with Special Needs

The last challenge identified was teachers' limited experience in dealing with children with special needs. Teachers are required to understand the needs of students with special needs by observing their special abilities, determining appropriate approaches, and assisting them in adapting, especially to diverse classroom environments.

T1 stated:

“Kami tidak memiliki background untuk mengajar di kelas inklusi, sehingga kami harus bekerja ekstra untuk memahami kebutuhan anak berkebutuhan khusus seperti pendekatan seperti apa yang sesuai, kebutuhan khususnya seperti apa dan cara membuat mereka beradaptasi di kelas seperti apa. Namun, kami tetap berusaha agar mampu menjalankan kewajiban kami sebagai guru, meskipun memang membutuhkan waktu dan tenaga yang lebih.”

“We lack the background to teach in inclusive classrooms, so we have to go the extra mile to understand the needs of children with special needs – such as what approaches are appropriate, what their specific needs are, and how to help them adapt to the classroom environment. However, we continue to strive to fulfill our duties as teachers, even though it does require more time and effort.”

T2 added:

"Sebenarnya agak susah. Hal ini karena saya juga tidak punya background khusus pada pendidikan inklusif, tapi kami berusaha agar kami bisa."

"It's actually a bit difficult, because I don't have any specific background in inclusive education, but we're doing our best to make it work."

The teachers' statements indicate that teachers have limited backgrounds in teaching inclusive education. This requires teachers to work extra hard to assist and support students with special needs. This finding is supported by research Long et al., (2022), which states that many Montessori teachers have not received specific training related to the education of children with special needs, making it difficult for them to guide and provide effective and optimal support. Therefore, it can be seen that success in developing student character in a multicultural and inclusive Montessori classroom also requires teachers' readiness, experience, and ability to respond to diverse student populations.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that in the process of developing children's character in a multicultural and inclusive Montessori classroom, teachers face several challenges. The findings of this study indicate that teachers face challenges such as understanding the characteristics and individual needs of new students, managing classroom diversity, and limited experience with students with special needs. Given these challenges, teachers are required to work extra hard because they need to conduct continuous observations, adjust appropriate approaches, manage equitable classroom interactions, and also provide support appropriate to the diversity of students. Overall, this study confirms that in character development, teachers need readiness, flexibility, and responsiveness in creating a safe learning environment.

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