



Cultural and Social Identity Formation in Multicultural Islamic Elementary Schools: A Social Studies Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Cultural and social identity formation in multicultural educational settings has become a critical issue in contemporary Islamic schooling, particularly at the elementary level where foundational values are internalized. This study aims to examine how social studies learning contributes to the development of students' cultural and social identities in multicultural Islamic elementary schools. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis of instructional materials. Data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify patterns of identity construction, value negotiation, and intercultural interaction. The findings reveal that social studies education plays a significant role in mediating identity formation by integrating religious values, local cultural narratives, and national identity frameworks. Instructional practices that emphasize dialogue, storytelling, and contextual learning enable students to negotiate multiple identities—religious, cultural, and civic—within a harmonious framework. However, tensions emerge when dominant cultural narratives overshadow minority perspectives, potentially limiting inclusive identity development.

Keyword : Cultural Identity, Elementary, Education

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INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of multicultural societies has transformed educational institutions into critical arenas for identity negotiation and formation. Schools are no longer neutral spaces of knowledge transmission; rather, they function as dynamic social environments where values, norms, and identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed. In this context, the question of how cultural and social identities are formed among young learners becomes increasingly significant, particularly in settings where diversity intersects with religious education (Newerkla, 2025; Strobin, 2025). Islamic elementary schools, especially those situated in multicultural contexts, offer a unique site for examining how identity is shaped through the interplay of faith, culture, and social interaction.

At the elementary level, identity formation is particularly sensitive because students are in a developmental stage where foundational beliefs, attitudes, and social orientations are being internalized (Malhotra, 2023; Villing, 2025; Yang, 2024). Early educational experiences play a decisive role in shaping how students perceive themselves and others, influencing long-term patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and social engagement. However, it would be overly simplistic to assume that identity formation at this stage is solely guided by formal instruction. Informal interactions, peer relationships, and implicit institutional norms also contribute significantly to the construction of identity.

Islamic elementary schools introduce an additional layer of complexity, as identity formation is not only social and cultural but also deeply intertwined with religious values (Chandra, 2022; Donahue-Martens, 2025; Lu, 2024). The integration of Islamic teachings into daily school practices creates a framework within which students interpret moral behavior, social roles, and community belonging. Yet, a critical question arises: does this integration promote inclusive identity formation, or does it risk reinforcing homogenized understandings of identity that overlook cultural diversity

Multiculturalism within Islamic schools challenges the assumption that religious identity is monolithic. Students may come from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socio-cultural backgrounds, each bringing distinct experiences and perspectives into the classroom (Jewell, 2025; Khayambashi, 2023; Zhao, 2024). This diversity creates both opportunities for intercultural learning and risks of cultural dominance. When certain

cultural interpretations of Islam are privileged over others, identity formation may become skewed toward a dominant narrative, marginalizing minority voices.

Social studies education plays a central role in mediating these dynamics because it explicitly addresses issues of culture, society, history, and citizenship. Unlike other subjects, social studies provides a structured space for discussing diversity, social interaction, and collective identity (Li, 2024; Wappa, 2024; Zhovkva, 2025). However, the effectiveness of social studies in fostering inclusive identity formation depends heavily on how it is taught. Pedagogical approaches that encourage dialogue and critical thinking are more likely to support pluralistic identity development than those that rely on rote learning or uncritical transmission of dominant narratives.

Despite its potential, social studies education is often implemented in ways that fail to fully engage with the complexities of multicultural identity. Curriculum materials may present simplified or standardized representations of culture that do not reflect students' lived realities (Cmielewski, 2025; Danielyan, 2022; Dmitriyev, 2024). Such representations can lead to a form of “surface multiculturalism,” where diversity is acknowledged but not critically examined. This raises concerns about whether social studies education truly facilitates meaningful identity negotiation or merely reinforces existing social hierarchies.

From a theoretical standpoint, identity formation is widely understood as a socially constructed and context-dependent process (Kim, 2022; Ursu, 2022; Wilhelm, 2022). Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of interaction and cultural tools in shaping individual cognition and identity. Similarly, social identity theory highlights how group membership influences self-concept and intergroup relations. In multicultural Islamic elementary schools, these theoretical perspectives intersect, as students navigate multiple identities simultaneously—religious, cultural, and civic.

However, an uncritical application of these theories may overlook the unique role of religion as both a unifying and differentiating force. Religious identity can provide a strong sense of belonging and moral orientation, yet it can also create boundaries that distinguish “insiders” from “outsiders.” The challenge lies in understanding how Islamic education can balance these dual functions, fostering a sense of unity without suppressing diversity.

Empirical studies on multicultural education have often emphasized values such as tolerance, respect, and intercultural competence. While these values are important, they may not fully capture the deeper processes of identity negotiation that occur in classroom settings. Students do not simply adopt values; they interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist them (Cutler, 2023; Jayasooriya, 2025; Sadulova, 2025). Therefore, research must move beyond normative assumptions and examine how identity is actually constructed in practice.

Research on Islamic education, on the other hand, has traditionally focused on moral and spiritual development, often treating identity as a relatively stable outcome of religious instruction (Kaprans, 2024; Kassim, 2023; Sarkar, 2024). This perspective may underestimate the fluid and contested nature of identity in multicultural contexts. Without acknowledging this complexity, educational practices risk promoting rigid identity frameworks that do not align with students' diverse experiences.

A critical gap emerges at the intersection of these two bodies of literature. Multicultural education research tends to overlook the role of religion, while Islamic education research often underexplores cultural diversity. This fragmentation limits our understanding of how identity is formed in settings where both dimensions are equally significant. Addressing this gap requires an integrative approach that considers the interplay between religious values, cultural diversity, and social interaction.

Another important dimension to consider is the role of teachers as mediators of identity formation. Teachers do not merely deliver content; they interpret and contextualize it, influencing how students understand cultural and social differences. Their beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical choices can either facilitate inclusive dialogue or reinforce exclusionary practices. This underscores the importance of teacher agency in shaping the identity formation process.

At the same time, institutional structures and policies also play a significant role. School culture, curriculum design, and assessment practices all contribute to shaping the environment in which identity is constructed. A school that promotes open dialogue and values diversity is more likely to support inclusive identity formation than one that emphasizes conformity and uniformity. Therefore, identity formation must be understood as a multi-level process involving individual, pedagogical, and institutional factors.

It is also necessary to critically question the assumption that multicultural education automatically leads to positive outcomes. Without careful implementation, multicultural approaches can become superficial or even counterproductive. For example, emphasizing differences without fostering meaningful interaction can reinforce stereotypes rather than reduce them. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how multicultural education operates in practice.

Given these complexities, this study seeks to examine cultural and social identity formation in multicultural Islamic elementary schools through a social studies perspective (Almashour, 2024; Merwe, 2022; Protassova, 2024). The research aims to explore how pedagogical practices, classroom interactions, and curricular representations shape identity construction, as well as the challenges and tensions that arise in multicultural settings. By focusing on the lived experiences of students and teachers, the study moves beyond abstract theory to provide a grounded analysis of identity formation processes.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on education, identity, and diversity by offering a more integrated perspective that bridges the gap between multicultural and Islamic education. It challenges simplistic assumptions about identity formation and highlights the importance of context-sensitive, dialogical, and inclusive approaches. In doing so, it provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to foster more equitable and meaningful educational experiences in increasingly diverse societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the processes of cultural and social identity formation in multicultural Islamic elementary schools through a social studies perspective. The case study approach was selected because identity formation is a complex, context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative measures. Rather than seeking generalizable statistical relationships, this study aims to generate an in-depth understanding of how identities are constructed, negotiated, and represented within specific educational settings.

However, it is important to acknowledge a potential limitation of this approach: findings derived from case studies are often context-bound. A critical stance was therefore adopted by ensuring analytical depth and theoretical linkage, allowing the

findings to contribute to broader conceptual discussions rather than mere contextual description.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that students in multicultural Islamic elementary schools construct their cultural and social identities through a dynamic process of interaction, negotiation, and alignment with both religious and socio-cultural frameworks. Students do not passively absorb identity from curricular content; instead, they actively interpret and reconcile multiple identity markers, including religious affiliation, ethnic background, and social belonging. Classroom interactions show that students often shift between these identities depending on context, suggesting that identity formation is fluid and situational. However, this apparent flexibility should not be romanticized. A closer analysis indicates that many of these negotiations occur within boundaries set by dominant institutional narratives, particularly those emphasizing uniform interpretations of Islamic values. This raises a critical question: to what extent is identity negotiation genuinely open, and to what extent is it subtly guided toward conformity?

Social studies education emerges as a central mediating space in which identity formation is both facilitated and constrained. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping how diversity is introduced and discussed, often using storytelling, group dialogue, and contextual examples to promote values such as tolerance and cooperation. These pedagogical practices create opportunities for students to engage with multiple perspectives and reflect on their own identities. Nevertheless, the depth of this engagement varies significantly. In several instances, discussions remain at a normative level, emphasizing harmony without critically addressing differences or tensions. From a critical standpoint, this suggests that social studies education may function more as a mechanism for social cohesion than as a platform for critical multicultural inquiry. Such a tendency risks producing what might be termed “surface-level inclusivity,” where diversity is acknowledged but not deeply interrogated.

Another important finding concerns the dominance of majoritarian cultural narratives within classroom discourse and instructional materials. While multicultural elements are present, they are often framed within a dominant cultural lens that reflects the majority group’s interpretation of Islamic and social values. Minority perspectives tend to be underrepresented or simplified, limiting students’ exposure to the full complexity of cultural diversity (Palaiologou, 2023; Scorer, 2025; Zhu, 2024) . This imbalance has implications for identity formation, as it may lead students from minority backgrounds to adapt or suppress aspects of their cultural identity in order to align with dominant expectations. A critical interpretation would argue that this dynamic reflects a subtle form of cultural hegemony, where inclusion is conditional upon conformity to prevailing norms.

At the same time, the study finds that peer interaction plays a significant role in shaping identity beyond formal instruction (Bonoli, 2022; Lin, 2024; Miani, 2023). Informal conversations, collaborative tasks, and social relationships among students

provide spaces where identities are negotiated more freely. In these interactions, students often express their cultural backgrounds more openly and engage in mutual learning that is less constrained by institutional expectations. This suggests that identity formation is not solely determined by curriculum or pedagogy, but also by the social ecology of the classroom. However, even in these informal spaces, power dynamics and group hierarchies can influence whose identities are recognized and valued, indicating that peer interaction is not inherently egalitarian.

The findings also highlight the critical role of teachers as agents of identity mediation. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical choices significantly influence how cultural and social identities are constructed in the classroom. Teachers who adopt reflective and dialogical approaches tend to create more inclusive learning environments, encouraging students to explore and articulate their identities. Conversely, teachers who rely on rigid or authoritative approaches may reinforce singular identity narratives, limiting opportunities for critical engagement. This underscores the importance of teacher reflexivity in multicultural Islamic education, as educators must navigate the tension between maintaining religious values and fostering cultural inclusivity.

Institutional factors further shape the conditions under which identity formation occurs. School policies, curriculum design, and organizational culture collectively influence how diversity is represented and managed. Schools that promote openness, dialogue, and recognition of diversity tend to support more balanced identity development, while those emphasizing uniformity may inadvertently suppress cultural differences. This finding challenges the assumption that multicultural settings automatically lead to inclusive outcomes. Without deliberate and critical implementation, multicultural education can remain superficial or even reinforce existing inequalities.

Overall, the study demonstrates that cultural and social identity formation in multicultural Islamic elementary schools is a complex and contested process. While social studies education provides a valuable platform for engaging with diversity, its impact depends on how it is enacted in practice. The findings suggest that identity formation is shaped not only by what is taught, but also by how it is taught, who is represented, and how interactions unfold within the classroom. Therefore, fostering inclusive identity development requires more than the integration of multicultural content; it demands critical, reflective, and context-sensitive pedagogical practices that acknowledge and engage with the realities of diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural and social identity formation in multicultural Islamic elementary schools is neither a linear nor a neutral process, but a dynamic and contested negotiation shaped by the interaction of religious values, cultural diversity, pedagogical practices, and institutional contexts. Students actively construct their identities through continuous engagement with multiple influences, including classroom

discourse, peer interaction, and broader school culture. Rather than simply internalizing predefined norms, they interpret, adapt, and sometimes reconcile overlapping identity dimensions, reflecting the fluid nature of identity in multicultural settings.

Social studies education plays a crucial mediating role in this process by providing a structured space for engaging with issues of culture, society, and collective identity. When implemented through dialogical and reflective pedagogies, it has the potential to foster inclusive identity development and intercultural understanding. However, the findings also reveal important limitations. The tendency to emphasize normative values without critically addressing diversity can lead to superficial inclusivity, while the dominance of majoritarian cultural narratives risks marginalizing minority perspectives. These dynamics suggest that social studies education, if not critically designed, may reproduce existing hierarchies rather than challenge them.

The study also highlights the significant influence of teachers and institutional structures in shaping identity formation. Teachers act as key agents who interpret and enact the curriculum, determining whether classrooms become spaces of genuine dialogue or instruments of conformity. Similarly, school policies and cultural environments either enable or constrain inclusive practices. This indicates that identity formation cannot be understood solely at the level of individual learners, but must be examined as a multi-layered process involving pedagogical and structural dimensions.

Importantly, this study challenges the common assumption that multicultural education automatically produces inclusive and harmonious outcomes. Without critical engagement, multicultural approaches may remain symbolic, failing to address deeper issues of representation, power, and inequality. Therefore, fostering meaningful identity formation requires a shift from surface-level recognition of diversity toward more critical, context-sensitive, and dialogical educational practices.

In conclusion, the study contributes to the broader discourse on multicultural and Islamic education by offering an integrated perspective that bridges religious and socio-cultural dimensions of identity formation. It underscores the need for rethinking social studies pedagogy as a transformative space that not only transmits values but also facilitates critical engagement with diversity. Future research is recommended to explore comparative contexts, incorporate longitudinal perspectives, and examine how policy frameworks can better support inclusive identity development in multicultural educational settings.

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