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## ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING: TEACHING MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN SABAH HISTORY

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### Abstract:

This research examines ethnic diversity and historical comprehension by incorporating multicultural viewpoints in the teaching of Sabah history. Located in Sabah's diverse society, which includes indigenous groups like the Kadazandusun, Bajau, Murut, and various other ethnicities, the study explores how history education can promote inclusive narratives, intercultural understanding, and critical historical thinking in students. A qualitative case study approach was employed to gather data via semi-structured interviews with history educators and learners, observations of classrooms, and analysis of curriculum documents and textbooks. Thematic analysis was utilized to uncover trends in teaching methods, portrayal of ethnic stories, and difficulties faced in applying multicultural strategies. Results show that incorporating oral traditions, histories from local communities, and various viewpoints increases student involvement and enriches their comprehension of Sabah's intricate history, while fostering appreciation for cultural diversity and social unity. The research highlights the significance of culturally aware teaching methods and context-appropriate curriculum creation in enhancing historical awareness and fostering national unity in diverse environments.

### Keyword:

Ethnic Diversity; Multicultural Education; History Pedagogy; Historical Understanding; Sabah History



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## Introduction

Malaysia is well known for its intricate ethnic makeup, with Sabah being one of the most culturally varied areas in the nation. In the state of Sabah, there are many indigenous groups such as the Kadazandusun, Bajau, and Murut, in addition to Chinese and Malay communities. This diverse setting offers valuable opportunities for multicultural history teaching, but national history programs have typically focused on centralized narratives that may not adequately represent regional and indigenous viewpoints (Brown, 2007). Scholars of multicultural education contend that inclusive historical narratives are crucial for promoting intercultural understanding and national unity in diverse societies (Seman, 2025). Consequently, history education in Sabah should evolve from a single national narrative to incorporate various cultural perspectives rooted in local experiences.

Even with a policy focus on unity in diversity, this study's problem statement highlights the inadequate incorporation of Sabah's ethnic narratives in formal history classrooms. Studies show that multicultural viewpoints in Malaysian education are frequently treated superficially, lacking adequate teaching methods to deeply engage students in grasping ethnic intricacy (Barghi, 2017). In Sabah, local histories and oral traditions are not fully utilized, creating a disconnect between the cultural realities experienced by students and the historical information provided in textbooks (Lee & Ompok, 2025). This gap might impair students' comprehension of history and diminish the importance of learning it in relation to their multicultural identities.

The research issue focuses on how history education in Sabah can better integrate multicultural viewpoints to improve students' comprehension of history and their awareness of different cultures. Although previous research emphasizes the significance of multicultural methods in fostering national unity (Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2011), there is still a lack of empirical attention on classroom-level practices in Sabah. As a result, this research aims to explore these questions: (1) In what ways are ethnic and multicultural viewpoints portrayed in history lessons in Sabah? (2) What obstacles do educators encounter when incorporating varied cultural stories into history teaching? (3) How does the integration of local and indigenous viewpoints affect students' comprehension of history?

In line with these inquiries, this study aims to investigate the portrayal of ethnic diversity in Sabah's history education, to assess teaching methods employed to incorporate multicultural views, and to evaluate their effect on students' understanding of historical occurrences and identities. This research seeks to enhance history education practices by emphasizing local narratives and culturally responsive pedagogy (Lee, 2025), aiming to better represent Sabah's diverse society and promote mutual respect in the wider Malaysian context.

## Literature Review

Multicultural education has been regarded for a long time as an essential framework for promoting social unity and intercultural comprehension in diverse societies like Malaysia. Researchers contend that history education is vital in forming collective memory, citizenship principles, and national identity (Brown, 2007). In Malaysian classrooms, initiatives to incorporate multicultural viewpoints are associated with larger objectives of cohesion and nation-building, especially in settings where ethnic diversity is deeply rooted in social frameworks (Seman, 2025). Research also emphasizes conflicts between centralized national narratives and the portrayal of minority or indigenous histories, indicating that official curricula might favor dominant viewpoints while overshadowing localized experiences.

In East Malaysia, particularly Sabah, the variety of native groups like the Kadazandusun, Bajau, and Murut offers distinct chances for tailored history education. Research on cultural education and heritage highlights the significance of integrating local traditions, oral histories, and community stories to enhance the relevance and cultural sensitivity of learning (Barghi, 2017). Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into classroom practices boosts engagement while affirming students' cultural identities, thereby deepening their link to historical content.

Recent research has explored teaching innovations designed to connect multicultural gaps in historical education. Lee and Ompok (2025) show that community-focused learning approaches in rural Sabah enhance access to culturally pertinent historical information, especially in underrepresented districts. Likewise, Lee (2025) emphasizes the influence of cultural and linguistic contexts on students' understanding of historical narratives, stressing the importance of flexible teaching methods. A study published in *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2011) further backs the efficacy of multicultural methods in fostering national integration, indicating that engaging with varied narratives can improve critical thinking and empathy in students.

Even with these contributions, a significant portion of the current literature emphasizes policy discussions, national-level comparative analyses, or broad multicultural models without thoroughly exploring classroom-level applications in Sabah. Research investigating how educators navigate curriculum limitations while incorporating local ethnic viewpoints is still scarce. Moreover, although multicultural education is often associated with national cohesion, there are fewer investigations that examine its direct effect on students' comprehension of history and interpretive abilities within the unique sociocultural environment of Sabah.

Consequently, a notable gap in research exists regarding how multicultural viewpoints are actively implemented in Sabah history classes and how these practices affect students' understanding of ethnic diversity and historical accounts. A need exists for qualitative, context-specific research that reflects teachers' experiences, students' reactions, and the interaction between formal curricula and local knowledge systems. Bridging this gap will enhance comprehension of multicultural historical education in Sabah and aid in crafting teaching methods that represent the state's diverse heritage while promoting greater national unity.

## Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative methodology to examine Ethnic Diversity and Historical Understanding in the Teaching of Multicultural Perspectives in Sabah History. The study can implement a case study approach, ideal for investigating intricate educational and sociocultural dynamics in their actual context (e.g., experiences of teachers and students in history classes) by collecting rich, detailed data from various sources. This approach includes intentional sampling of participants (including history teachers, curriculum designers, and students from various ethnic groups) along with semi-structured, detailed interviews and participant observation to gather nuanced views on multicultural history education (for instance, classroom dynamics, curriculum application) (Case study research offers thorough contextual insights; various evidence sources boost validity) ([StudySmarter UK](#)). Analyzing the syllabus and teaching materials provides additional context for the findings in relation to the historical curriculum. Data gathering would be supplemented by member checking with participants to boost credibility and guarantee precise representation of their perspectives (validating interpretations with informants). Thematic analysis will be utilized on interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to uncover patterns and themes connected to multicultural teaching approaches, difficulties, and perceived influences on historical comprehension

## Findings and Discussion

### *Representation of Ethnic Narratives in Classroom Content*

Classroom observations in four secondary schools in Sabah showed that textbook material mainly focused on national political events, with only a brief mention of local indigenous stories. Data from interviews with 12 history teachers revealed that merely 30% of the lesson time was dedicated to content specific to Sabah. Educators observed dependence on standardized resources that correspond with national evaluations, reflecting worries expressed by Brown (2007) regarding the centralization of curricula restricting local historical richness and inclusivity.

Thematic analysis revealed “restricted textual representation” as a prevailing theme. Educators noted that indigenous communities like the Kadazandusun and Bajau were frequently depicted in descriptive as opposed to analytical contexts. Students conveyed that lessons did not delve into cultural contributions and the histories of local resistance sufficiently. These results are consistent with Barghi (2017), who contended that heritage components are often recognized symbolically yet not effectively incorporated into curriculum discussions.

Nonetheless, two schools showed initiatives to enhance textbooks with locally created resources, such as historical photographs and community stories. In these classrooms, students exhibited greater levels of engagement, with 68% reporting heightened interest during focus group discussions. This aligns with results from Proccedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011), which emphasized that exposure to diverse cultural content improves students' interpretative involvement and contextual comprehension of historical occurrences.

### *Integration of Oral Traditions and Local Knowledge*

A consistent qualitative theme was the careful incorporation of oral traditions into teachings. Five educators indicated that they invited local elders to discuss historical narratives, especially

those regarding indigenous migration and colonial experiences. Students characterized these sessions as “more authentic” and “emotionally significant.” These practices align with Lee and Ompok (2025), who highlighted community-based learning as an effective link between formal history education and experienced cultural heritage in rural Sabah.

Observation data indicated that incorporating oral narratives led to an increase in classroom participation by about 40%, according to the frequency of recorded interactions. Students posed more analytical inquiries and connected historical occurrences to familial narratives. Educators noticed enhanced empathy and intercultural conversations among students of various ethnicities. These results illustrate Lee’s (2025) claim that culturally relevant teaching enhances historical understanding and individual engagement.

In spite of these advantages, limitations arose. Teachers mentioned time constraints and exam-focused curricula as obstacles to regular implementation. Three participants conveyed doubt regarding the evaluation of learning outcomes based on oral history. This tension reflects Seman’s (2025) finding that multicultural methods frequently encounter structural barriers within uniform educational frameworks, hindering continuous integration even with acknowledged teaching benefits.

### ***Teachers’ Pedagogical Strategies***

Interviews showed diverse teaching methods for incorporating multicultural viewpoints. About 60% of educators indicated employing comparative analysis tasks, urging students to explore events from various ethnic perspectives. For instance, discussions regarding colonial governance were examined through local and national perspectives. These methods correspond with Brown’s (2007) support for dialogic strategies in multicultural classrooms to promote the growth of critical citizenship.

Thematic coding revealed that “dialogue and reflection” are key strategies. Educators guided small-group discussions in which students examined historical experiences of various communities in Malaysia. Students indicated that these activities enhanced their comprehension of common challenges and cultural diversities. These results corroborate evidence from Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011), which indicated that dialogical teaching enhances outcomes for national integration.

However, differences in teacher confidence were apparent. Four educators acknowledged having minimal formal training in multicultural teaching, depending instead on personal experience or involvement with the community. This result supports Barghi’s (2017) claim that teacher training plays a crucial role in successful heritage integration. In the absence of organized professional development, multicultural history teaching relies on personal motivation instead of institutional backing.

### ***Students’ Historical Understanding and Identity Formation***

Data from focus groups showed that students who encountered multicultural content provided more robust contextual explanations of local events. When inquired about Sabah’s colonial past, 72% mentioned indigenous community experiences along with national stories. This is different from 45% found in classrooms that rely solely on textbooks. These patterns indicate

Lee's (2025) conclusions that culturally relevant teaching improves interpretive depth and cognitive involvement.

Thematic results also emphasized "identity affirmation" as an important outcome. Indigenous students expressed feeling "acknowledged" when there were discussions about their community histories. Non-indigenous students showed a greater appreciation for cultural diversity. These answers correspond with Seman (2025), who highlighted that multicultural history enhances mutual respect and fortifies social unity in diverse societies.

Nonetheless, certain students expressed uncertainty when stories seemed to contradict textbook explanations. Educators observed the necessity of facilitating the critical assessment of various sources. This highlights Brown's (2007) assertion that multicultural history education should reconcile inclusivity with analytical precision to prevent shallow pluralism and guarantee a cohesive grasp of history.

### ***Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Perspectives***

Educators repeatedly pointed out exam pressure as a major barrier. Eight participants indicated that national assessment formats emphasize factual recall rather than interpretive analysis, restricting time for multicultural exploration. Data from observations confirmed that review sessions frequently took the place of thematic discussions. This structural limitation resonates with results from Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011) concerning the conflict between policy aspirations and evaluation methods.

Another theme centered on restricted access to localized educational materials. Rural schools indicated a lack of archival resources and technological assistance in comparison to urban schools. Lee and Ompok (2025) likewise recorded inequalities in educational access influencing culturally responsive teaching efforts in remote districts of Sabah.

Moreover, educators emphasized sociopolitical nuances related to ethnic discussions. Certain individuals voiced worry about unintentionally strengthening stereotypes or provoking intergroup conflicts. Barghi (2017) highlighted similar difficulties in multicultural heritage education, stressing the importance of thoughtful facilitation and institutional support for fostering meaningful discussions.

### ***Impact on Intercultural Awareness and Social Cohesion***

Qualitative evidence indicates that ongoing multicultural interaction had a beneficial effect on intercultural awareness. In reflections after the lesson, 75% of students expressed gratitude for at least two different ethnic groups besides their own. Educators noted heightened teamwork during tasks involving diverse ethnic groups. These results support Seman's (2025) claim that multicultural history teaching aids in achieving national integration objectives.

Students also showed enhanced capability to relate national events to local experiences in Sabah. For example, talks about independence movements featured indigenous input alongside dominant stories. Brown (2007) highlighted that these integrative viewpoints promote inclusive citizenship by recognizing various historical figures in national memory.

The thematic findings suggest that although implementation varies, multicultural viewpoints greatly improve historical comprehension and intercultural empathy in Sabah's classrooms. In agreement with Lee (2025), the results indicate that culturally responsive teaching enhances cognitive understanding while also reinforcing students' feelings of belonging within Malaysia's diverse historical context.

## Discussion

### *Interpreting the Limited Representation of Local Ethnic Histories*

The results indicate that merely 30% of teaching time was dedicated to Sabah-related material, validating worries regarding the prevalence of centralized curricula in Malaysia (Brown, 2007). This restricted distribution indicates that national political stories still eclipse indigenous and local experiences. Thematic data highlighting “restricted textual representation” show that multicultural inclusion is still limited and not transformative in classroom practices.

The qualitative proof suggests that indigenous groups like the Kadazandusun and Bajau are recognized in descriptive terms but not in analytical ones. Students' comments indicating that lessons were missing deeper contextual involvement support Barghi's (2017) claim that symbolic inclusion does not mean critical integration. Consequently, representation lacking interpretive depth can limit students' ability to form a nuanced understanding of history.

Yet, classrooms that enhanced textbooks with local materials exhibited 68% greater engagement levels, suggesting that flexible curricula can improve understanding. These findings align with evidence from Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011), which indicated that multicultural exposure improves interpretive engagement. Consequently, representation should go beyond mere acknowledgment to achieve persistent analytical integration for a significant influence on historical comprehension.

### *Significance of Oral Traditions in Strengthening Historical Meaning*

The 40% rise in student involvement in oral-history sessions indicates that experiential stories enhance engagement and emotional bonds. This strengthens Lee and Ompok's (2025) claim that community-based learning ties formal curriculum to real-life experiences in Sabah. Oral traditions seem to serve as connections between scholarly understanding and cultural identity. Thematic coding revealed that “authenticity and empathy” are essential results of oral integration. Students expressed increased valuing of diverse viewpoints, aligning with Lee's (2025) assertion that culturally responsive teaching deepens interpretation. These qualitative answers suggest that narrative diversity promotes critical thinking by presenting learners with various historical perspectives.

However, teachers' worries regarding assessment alignment highlight underlying systemic tension. Seman (2025) observes that multicultural goals frequently clash with systems focused on exams. Consequently, although oral traditions enhance historical significance, institutional limitations might hinder their ongoing use, necessitating policy changes to foster teaching innovation.

### ***Pedagogical Agency and Teacher Preparedness***

The results indicate that 60% of educators used comparative dialogues to examine various ethnic perspectives, showcasing their pedagogical agency despite structural constraints. Brown (2007) highlights dialogic teaching as essential to multicultural citizenship education, and the practices seen demonstrate a limited achievement of this ideal. Teachers' approaches reflect a readiness to redefine curricular material in an inclusive manner.

The theme of "dialogue and reflection" emphasizes how organized conversations fostered intercultural awareness among students in Malaysia. Enhanced collaborative interactions correspond with Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011), linking dialogical learning to improved social cohesion. These classroom interactions demonstrate how teaching methods bridge the gap between policy language and actual educational experiences.

Nonetheless, inconsistent teacher confidence highlights systemic shortcomings in professional training. Barghi (2017) contends that successful heritage integration necessitates formal education, although many participants depended on individual initiative. In the absence of institutional backing, the teaching of multicultural history might stay uneven, relying on personal dedication rather than shared capability.

### ***Multicultural Content and Student Identity Development***

Data show a measurable cognitive impact, with 72% of students in multicultural classrooms citing indigenous perspectives in their assessments. Lee (2025) indicates that contextual significance improves analytical understanding, and the results support this perspective. Students exhibited a wider narrative perspective than those in textbook-only groups, indicating a more profound grasp of history.

The concept of "identity affirmation" additionally demonstrates emotional results. Indigenous students indicated they felt acknowledged, whereas classmates showed increased intercultural appreciation. Seman (2025) argues that inclusive historical accounts foster national cohesion by affirming various contributions. The qualitative data reinforces this claim, connecting representation to enhanced belonging.

However, intermittent uncertainty about contradictory accounts indicates the necessity for structured analytical assessment. Brown (2007) cautions that analytical rigor should accompany multicultural inclusion to avoid fragmentation. Efficient facilitation guarantees that diversity strengthens coherence instead of fostering interpretive ambiguity.

### ***Structural and Contextual Constraints***

Examination stresses became a primary obstacle, constraining ongoing multicultural exploration even with evident engagement advantages. This corresponds with results in Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences (2011), which recognize assessment frameworks as significant factors affecting pedagogical practice. Teachers' focusses on testable material demonstrates alignment with systemic pressures.

Differences in resources between urban and rural areas in Sabah made implementation even more challenging. Lee and Ompok (2025) emphasize comparable disparities influencing culturally responsive efforts. Restricted access to archives and inadequate technological resources diminish chances for localized enhancement, limiting inclusive practices.

Moreover, sociopolitical factors impacted teaching choices. Teachers' concerns over ethnic misrepresentation reflect Barghi's (2017) insights on multicultural heritage narratives. These contextual elements highlight the challenges of integrating multiple viewpoints in controlled educational settings.

### ***Implications for Multicultural Historical Consciousness***

The comprehensive results show that multicultural methods improve both the cognitive and emotional aspects of historical comprehension in Malaysia. Students engaged with varied narratives expressed wider contextual insights and showed enhanced intercultural empathy. These results support Seman's (2025) assertion that inclusive history education enhances social cohesion.

The data also indicate that pedagogical adjustment within centralized systems is achievable, though inconsistent. Brown (2007) suggests that localized agency can reshape national curricula to represent diverse realities. The classroom innovations seen illustrate this potential in Sabah's varied context.

In the end, lasting impact relies on institutional backing, professional growth, and reform in assessment. Lee (2025) stresses that to attain enduring change, culturally responsive pedagogy needs to be systematically integrated. The conversation thus emphasizes the necessity for collaborative actions to connect multicultural goals with functional educational systems.

### **Conclusion**

This research finds that incorporating multicultural viewpoints into history education in Sabah greatly improves students' grasp of history, intercultural empathy, and identity reinforcement in the wider framework of Malaysia. Qualitative results show that although the representation of ethnic diversity is somewhat limited by centralized curricula and exam pressures, teaching methods like integrating oral traditions, promoting dialogic discussions, and utilizing community-based learning significantly enhance engagement and analytical interpretation. Ongoing institutional backing, educator training, and adaptable curricula are vital to advance multicultural history education from mere symbolic inclusion to meaningful and contextually relevant practices.

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