.

Dialectics of Indonesian Culture and Malaysian Local Wisdom: Multicultural Learning Strategies at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur

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ABSTRACT

The operation of Indonesian schools abroad reflects broader tensions between national identity formation and the cultural forces shaping transnational education. Yet, insufficient attention has been given to how multicultural learning is negotiated in diaspora early childhood settings. This study interrogates the implementation of multicultural education at *Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur* (SIKL), examining the mechanisms by which teachers strategically integrate local Malaysian wisdom into the character formation of Indonesian kindergarten students while maintaining core national values. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on participant observation of classroom routines, in-depth interviews with teachers, and systematic document analysis, with data interpreted through the interactive framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña to capture processes of cultural mediation. The findings reveal a pedagogical formation conceptualized as blended habituation, in which teachers function as cultural brokers who mediate the dialectical relationship between Indonesian cultural values and Malaysian local wisdom, navigating nuanced sociocultural differences while enabling the coexistence of Indonesian moral frameworks with Malaysian public norms, such as disciplined queuing and regulated collective silence. These dynamics cultivate a functional hybrid identity aligned with the notion of Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs), positioning transnational early childhood environments as formative sites for cosmopolitan nationalism and underscoring the imperative for diaspora curricula to move beyond preservation toward deliberate cultural accommodation in fostering adaptive competence.

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INTRODUCTION

Education in an era of global disruption presents paradoxical challenges for educational institutions, particularly Indonesian Schools Abroad (SILN). On the one hand, schools serve as the last bastion of national identity preservation for diaspora children so that they are not uprooted from their cultural roots (Badrudin et al., 2025; Handrianto et al., 2024; Jannah et al., 2023). On the other hand, schools are also required to equip students with cross-cultural adaptation skills so that they can survive in their country of residence (Lee et al., 2022). The Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) is right at the center of this dilemma. As the largest Indonesian educational institution in Malaysia, SIKL cannot simply transfer the national curriculum rigidly. This school must become a space for dynamic identity negotiation, where Indonesian values such as cooperation must dialogue with the social norms of Malaysian society that dominate the public sphere (Yuli Pujianti, 2024). Failure to bridge these two cultural poles risks creating a generation that experiences double cultural alienation.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum creates both strategic opportunities and pedagogical challenges for multicultural learning in this context. Its flexibility allows schools to contextualize learning within their surrounding ecosystems (Hakim & Abidin, 2024; Samsudi et al., 2024; Shakina et al., 2025). yet unlike schools in Indonesia that integrate local wisdom from diverse regions, SIKL faces the distinct imperative of accommodating Malaysian local wisdom without diluting national identity (Pujiati & Wulansari, 2023; Ramli et al., 2025; Rifki et al., 2024). Teachers are therefore required to embed Malaysian public discipline into initiatives such as the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), forming hybrid pedagogical practices that remain insufficiently mapped in existing educational literature (Kuncorowati et al., 2025; Shakina et al., 2025).

Students at SIKL largely embody the characteristics of Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs), defined as children who engage meaningfully with multiple cultural environments during their formative years (Lee et al., 2022). Exposure to both home and host cultures generates developmental vulnerabilities; studies on migrant children demonstrate that without intentional educational intervention, national identity may erode or become fragmented (Saefudin et al., 2024). Although cultural proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia often leads to assumptions of effortless adaptation, empirical research suggests otherwise. Subtle differences frequently trigger unnoticed culture shock (Handrianto et al., 2024). while linguistic similarities that mask divergent meanings can inhibit students' social confidence (Zakaria et al., 2024). If left unaddressed, such micro-level barriers may accumulate into broader social competency challenges (Nurdiyanti et al., 2024; Yuli Pujianti, 2024).

Although the urgency of multicultural education in SILN has been widely discussed, research that specifically highlights cultural integration strategies at the Early Childhood Education (PAUD/TK) level is still very limited. Most previous studies have focused more on academic challenges and student adaptation at the higher education level (Handrianto et al., 2024; Miani, 2026) or the evaluation of formal curricula at the secondary education level. The aspects of habituation and informal social interaction of kindergarten students in responding to two overlapping cultures have not been explored in depth. In fact, the integration of cultural values into the daily routines of early childhood, such as queuing, greeting, and playing, is a vital foundation for character building. The absence of empirical work at this level risks positioning teachers' practices as intuitive rather than evidence-based (Prayitno et al., 2025).

This study aims to fill this epistemological gap by analyzing the implementation of multicultural learning at SIKL Kindergarten through a cultural dialectic approach (Perwitasari et al., 2025). The focus of the study is to reveal how teachers integrate Malaysian cultural discipline and local wisdom into Indonesian character-based student routines, and how these strategies impact students' social competencies (Aulia et al., 2025). This study offers a new perspective that the transnational environment is not an obstacle, but rather a living laboratory for the cultivation of multicultural values (Aprianti et al., 2023; Masuwd et al., 2025; Sopian et al., 2025). Through this study, it is hoped that an adaptive early childhood education praxis model will emerge for Indonesian schools abroad, capable of producing a generation that is strongly rooted in nationalism yet flexible in global interactionsloin.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth strategies for cultural dialectics in a transnational educational environment. The research was conducted at the Indonesian School Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) kindergarten in Malaysia, which was purposely selected due to its unique characteristics as a hybrid institution that combines the Indonesian national curriculum with the Malaysian social ecosystem. The research participants consisted of two main categories: (1) Key Informants, namely kindergarten B teachers who acted as cultural mediators, as well as the principal and parent representatives to validate the data; and (2) Observation Subjects, namely Kindergarten B students who represent the profile of Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs) in their daily interactions.

To ensure the validity of the findings, data collection was carried out through triangulation techniques, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Observations focused on students' adaptive behavior in daily routines, ranging from circle time activities, meal queues, to play interactions, to capture the phenomenon of culture shock or identity negotiation that arises naturally. Meanwhile, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers to explore tacit knowledge regarding the pedagogical strategies applied in bridging cultural differences. The data was reinforced by document analysis in the form of Teaching Modules and Pancasila student profile artifacts.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (Miles et al., 2020), which is circular in nature. This process began with data condensation, in which researchers sorted and focused on field data relevant to the theme of multiculturalism; continued with data display in the form of thematic narratives linking patterns of Indonesian Malaysian cultural interaction; and ended with drawing conclusions/verification to answer the research questions. This approach ensures that each finding produced has a strong empirical basis and is academically accountable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis from participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, and documentation studies at SIKL Kindergarten, this study found a unique pattern of cultural dialectics. This process does not occur through one-way assimilation, but rather through the negotiation of values structured within the curriculum and daily routines. The findings are grouped into two main themes: (1) Pedagogical Strategies of Cultural Dialectics, and (2) The Formation of Hybrid Character in Students.

Result

Pedagogical Strategy: Combining Pancasila Values and Malaysian Local Wisdom

Field findings reveal that the implementation of multicultural education at SIKL Kindergarten is not carried out partially through specific subjects, but rather integrated through an approach that researchers refer to as Blended Habituation. In this strategy, teachers do not place Indonesian and Malaysian cultures as two conflicting entities, but rather as a spectrum of complementary values. Teachers consciously design the classroom environment as a neutral zone where symbols of Indonesianness (such as Garuda Pancasila and the national anthem) coexist with Malaysian public social norms that students must obey when they step outside the school gates (Siregar & Suboh, 2025).

Operationally, this strategy is largely implemented through the hidden curriculum in daily routines. Based on participant observations participants, teachers take advantage of transitional moments such as when lining up to enter the classroom, washing hands, or during mealtimes to instill these dual values (Hidayati et al., 2024). As a concrete example, in the practice of discipline, teachers apply contextual double standards. In the classroom, students are taught warmth and familiarity typical of Indonesia (such as the tradition of salim/kissing the teacher's hand as a sign of respect) (Handrianto et al., 2024) but when in the corridors or common areas of the school, teachers instruct students to adopt the rigid orderliness of Malaysian public transportation, such as standing on the left side and remaining silent.

Furthermore, interview data clarified that this approach was a tactical response by teachers to the social reality of their students. Teachers realize that SIKL kindergarten students often experience ethical confusion when they see differences in adult behavior in Jakarta (Indonesia) and Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, teachers use the Contextual Role- Playing method (Nanggala et al., 2024). One of the activities observed was the Riding the RapidKL Bus simulation. In this simulation, teachers not only taught how to pay for tickets, but also emphasized the culture of silence and queuing in a straight line, which is a social norm in Malaysia, while inserting the moral message of Pancasila about respecting the rights of others. This shows that teachers act as cognitive bridges that help students sort out when to be Very Indonesian and when to be Globally Adaptive (Huang et al., 2025; Suryaningsih et al., 2023).

To simplify the mapping of this complex strategy, the researcher classified the patterns of cultural integration carried out by teachers into a learning matrix. The following table summarizes how the core values of home culture are juxtaposed with host culture in classroom activities.

Table 1. Matrix of Cultural Dialectics in Learning at SIKL Kindergarten

Learning Aspect	Indonesian Core Values (Home Culture)	Malaysian Local Wisdom (Host Culture)	Integrated Classroom Practice (Dialectical Practice)
Discipline	Order & Obedience: Lining up for ceremonies and following formal protocols.	Queue Culture: High emphasis on order in public spaces and transportation.	"KL Bus Simulation": Students practice queuing like at a RapidKL bus stop while maintaining the Indonesian "Salim" (hand-kissing) tradition when entering class.
Language & Communication	Formal Indonesian: The primary medium of	Malay Politeness: Use of soft intonation and	"Magic Words" Session: Introducing Malaysian honorifics (Cikgu, Puan) alongside

	instruction and national identity.	respectful vocabulary.	Indonesian ones (Bu Guru, Pak) to practice social code-switching.
Arts & Culture	National & Folk Songs: Patriotic songs from across the Indonesian archipelago.	Malaysian Folk Songs: Familiar regional tunes (e.g., Rasa Sayange, Lagu Tiga Kupang).	Malay-Indonesian Music Festival: Performing Indonesian regional songs while incorporating Malay instruments or rhythms familiar to the students' environment.
Independence	Gotong Royong: Collective cooperation and teamwork.	Self-Reliance: Focus on individual independence in managing personal belongings.	Classroom Chores: Students work together to clean play areas (Gotong Royong) but are held individually responsible for their own bags and shoes (Malaysian school standards).

[1] Researcher Data Compilation, 2025

The matrix above confirms that multicultural learning at SIKL goes beyond simply introducing traditional clothing or food. It touches on the behavioral domain. As expressed by one of the key informants (Teacher A) in an in-depth interview session: *"We don't want children to be confused. So when teaching them how to queue, we say, 'This is how to queue like the people in KL, but keep your heart as polite as Indonesian children'. So there is a bridge, they know how to behave wherever they are."*

Hybrid Student Profile: Student Responses as Cross-Cultural Kids

The impact of the blended habituation strategy implemented by teachers is significant on student behavior patterns. The research findings indicate that SIKL kindergarten students did not experience cultural disorientation but rather grew up to be what Lee categorized as adaptive Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs) (Lee et al., 2022). Students demonstrated Hybrid Cultural Competence, which is the ability to code-switch behavior and language according to the context of their environment (Pimpa & Aom, 2020).

This character-building process does not occur linearly, but rather circularly through daily interactions between home, school, and public environments. Based on the analysis of observation data, the researchers mapped the character-building process in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Model of Hybrid Character Formation in SIKL Kindergarten Students

Specifically, the manifestation of this hybrid character is observed in three main behavioral indicators: *First*, Linguistic Navigation Students demonstrate practical intelligence in sorting out language use. Although the official language of instruction in the classroom is Indonesian, observations capture a unique phenomenon in which students use Malay vocabulary for the sake of efficient communication with residents at school (such as janitors or cafeteria guards). An interesting example was found when a student asked permission to use the toilet: he used the word "Tandas" (Malay) because it was considered

easier to understand by those around him but returned to using standard Indonesian sentence structure when speaking in front of the class. This proves that students can navigate the challenges of Similar but Not Same (Zakaria et al., 2024) by functioning language as a tool for adaptation, not just a tool for communication.

Second, Social Resilience in Public Spaces The second indicator is seen in contextual compliance. SIKL kindergarten students show two sides of positive discipline. In the classroom, they are very expressive and warm, just like children in Indonesia. However, when invited to participate in field trips, they automatically adopt the norms of public silence and strict queuing, which are social standards that apply in Malaysia. Interviews with parents confirm this; many parents are amazed that their children become moral police for their own parents when on public transportation (MRT/Bus), often reminding their parents to stand on the left side of the escalator or not to talk loudly.

Third, Natural Tolerance in Diversity A heterogeneous classroom creates a living laboratory of tolerance. Conflicts between students are rarely triggered by differences in background. Instead, bonds of solidarity are formed as fellow children of migrants. These findings are in line with the argument by Saefudin et al. (2024) that education abroad, if managed well, strengthens social cohesion (Saefudin et al., 2024).

However, this adaptation process is not without its flaws. Field findings also note a Culture Shock Phase among students who have moved from Indonesia less than 3 months ago. Some new students appear to withdraw during breaks because they have difficulty understanding the thick Malay accent used. their peers when playing freely. However, thanks to the intervention of teachers who actively act as mediators (as described in Point 1), this isolation phase only lasts an average of 2-4 weeks before students fully integrate.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) has successfully transformed the challenges of a transnational environment into valuable pedagogical assets (Apalkova et al., 2025). Unlike conventional assimilation approaches that tend to force students to completely blend into the local culture, or segregation approaches that isolate students from their surroundings, SIKL implements a middle ground strategy that researchers refer to as cultural dialectics. The following discussion elaborates on the implications of these findings in three main dimensions: the role of teachers as mediators in reducing glocal tensions, strategies for navigating the trap of cultural homogeneity, and the formation of functional hybrid identities in students.

Teachers as Cultural Mediators in Reducing Global Local Tensions

Findings on blended habituation strategies in SIKL kindergartens broaden the perspective of transnational education, which has been dominated by higher education studies. Miani (2026), in her study at the university level, found a sharp phenomenon of global-local tensions due to the clash of values between international institutions and the local context in China. These tensions often trigger academic resistance (Miani, 2026). However, this study found different facts at the early childhood education (PAUD) level. These cultural tensions did not develop into conflict but were mitigated through the active intervention of teachers acting as cultural mediators (Wang, 2025).

From Vygotsky's perspective, teachers at SIKL Kindergarten perform the function of social scaffolding (Vygotsky, 2018). Teachers provide a cognitive bridge for students to cross from their actual zone of development (home/Indonesian culture) to their potential zone of development (ability to adapt to the Malaysian environment). When teachers teach the "Riding the RapidKL Bus" simulation while maintaining Indonesian manners and etiquette, they are

creating what is known as a Third Space. In this space, the Malaysian value of queueing is not seen as a threat to Indonesian identity, but rather as an add-on competence that enriches the students' profile.

Furthermore, the success of this mediation greatly depends on curriculum flexibility. Nurdiyanti et al. (2024) analyzed that the Merdeka Curriculum provides autonomy for schools to contextualize. While Nurdiyanti highlights this flexibility in the context of science learning, the findings of this study confirm that flexibility is far more vital in a socio-cultural context. This autonomy allows teachers to insert Malaysian life curriculum, such as escalator rules and the prohibition of eating on the MRT, into teaching modules without violating the structure of the Indonesian national curriculum. Without the active role of teachers as mediators who translate these cultural codes, students are prone to value confusion.

Taken together, these findings reframe cultural mediation in transnational early childhood education not merely as a responsive pedagogical practice but as an intentional architecture through which intercultural competence is systematically cultivated. More fundamentally, this study shifts the understanding of teachers' roles from cultural transmitters to active designers of intercultural learning environments that enable young learners to navigate multiple cultural logics without experiencing identity dissonance. Such a perspective reinforces the view that culturally responsive pedagogy extends beyond instructional adaptation toward the deliberate formation of globally oriented yet nationally grounded learners (Gay, 2018). Within this framework, transnational classrooms emerge not simply as sites of curriculum delivery but as developmental spaces where the foundations of cultural intelligence are constructed from the earliest stages of education.

Navigating the Similar but Not Same Trap

One of the most important theoretical contributions of this study is the confirmation and elaboration of the Similar but Not Same phenomenon raised by Zakaria (Zakaria et al., 2024). There is a common assumption that Indonesian students will easily adapt in Malaysia due to cultural proximity. However, Handrianto warn that this closeness often becomes an adaptation trap (Handrianto et al., 2024). Because they feel the same, individuals are often less aware of micro-differences, which then trigger fatal communication misunderstandings.

Field data at SIKL Kindergarten shows that the school consciously counters this simplistic assumption. Findings on the use of the word "Tandas" or "Kamar Mandi" or differences in intonation between Malay and Indonesian prove that the challenge of student adaptation is not in striking differences, but in subtle nuances. If students were in a Western country, the differences would be so stark that they would be easy to recognize. However, in Malaysia, the differences are subtle. This is where the crucial role of multicultural education at SIKL comes in: acting as a decoder or cultural code breaker.

By explicitly teaching specific vocabulary differences and public etiquette, the school helps students develop intercultural sensitivity. Students are trained not to get caught up in perceptions of false similarities. The pedagogical implications are significant: the successful adaptation of SIKL kindergarten students did not occur because Indonesian and Malaysian cultures are similar, but because the school deliberately taught them the differences(Yaengkhunchao et al., 2023). Without this intervention, students risked social alienation because they were considered rude according to local standards, even though they were only carrying habits from home that were considered normal in Indonesia (Cantika et al., 2024).

More importantly, this study challenges the persistent assumption that cultural proximity naturally facilitates adaptation. Instead, the findings demonstrate that proximity may obscure critical micro-differences, making structured pedagogical intervention indispensable. In this sense, successful adaptation emerges not from similarity itself but from the school's institutional capacity to render cultural nuances visible and pedagogically actionable.

The Transformation of Cross-Cultural Kids: From Confusion to Hybridity

In the discourse on national identity, Saefudin often voice concerns about the erosion of nationalism among migrant children, especially in border areas such as Sabah (Saefudin et al., 2024). However, the findings of this study offer new optimism that distinguishes the context of SIKL students from Saefudin's study. SIKL kindergarten students who fall into the Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs) category according to Lee definition do not show symptoms of identity loss or nationalism ambiguity (Lee et al., 2022).

On the contrary, students demonstrate the formation of a functional hybrid identity (Zhou et al., 2024). They grow into individuals who can position themselves: becoming warm Indonesians when they are within their community, yet able to switch to being disciplined Kuala Lumpur citizens when they are in public spaces. This ability to navigate social situations is a form of high-level cultural intelligence that is rarely possessed by children who grow up in monocultural environments. Intensive interaction with foreign cultures at SIKL functions as a reflective mirror that strengthens students' awareness of their original identity.

More profoundly, this phenomenon indicates the birth of Cosmopolitan Nationalism at an early age. Students do not see being Indonesian and being a global citizen as a binary choice, but rather as layered identities. This refutes concerns that a multinational environment will erode the character of Pancasila (Paisun et al., 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025; Shonhaji, 2026). In fact, the challenges of the environment force students to understand Pancasila not merely as memorized principles, but as a code of conduct that distinguishes them from other cultural groups, while also enabling them to respect those differences authentically.

Collectively, these insights invite a reconsideration of deficit-oriented narratives surrounding migrant children. Rather than framing cross-cultural exposure as a risk to national identity, the present study demonstrates its generative potential in fostering layered forms of belonging. Hybrid identity, therefore, should be interpreted not as a sign of cultural dilution but as an emergency aligned with the demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

Accordingly, this study advances the argument that transnational school's function not merely as sites of curriculum delivery but as microcosms of cultural negotiation where nationalism and global citizenship are co-constructed rather than positioned in opposition. These insights reinforce Rizvi's argument that contemporary education increasingly unfolds within transnational spaces that require cosmopolitan orientations rather than culturally bounded perspectives (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Accordingly, hybrid identity should not be interpreted as a dilution of national belonging but as an adaptive capacity shaped by the demands of global interconnectedness.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transnational environment at the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) is not a threat to the erosion of nationalism but rather an effective social laboratory for the formation of multicultural character. Through the Cultural Dialectics strategy, kindergarten teachers successfully transform potential value clashes into adaptive competencies by deliberately introducing cultural nuances into students' daily routines. The findings confirm that student adaptation is shaped less by cultural proximity than by intentional pedagogical intervention, positioning teachers not only as educators but also as cultural mediators who bridge the ideal values of Pancasila with the social realities of Malaysian society. More broadly, this study repositions transnational early childhood education from a site often associated with identity vulnerability to a strategic arena for cultivating learners who are both nationally grounded and globally competent.

Theoretically, this study challenges the persistent assumption that children growing up in cross-cultural environments inevitably experience identity confusion. Instead, SIKL kindergarten students demonstrate the emergence of a functional hybrid identity that enables them to navigate multiple social codes across private and public spaces. This finding contributes to expanding scholarly understandings of hybridity by framing it not as cultural dilution but as an adaptive developmental capacity shaped by increasingly interconnected educational landscapes. Accordingly, early childhood curriculum in Indonesian schools abroad should move beyond cultural preservation toward structured opportunities for accommodating local wisdom as a form of adaptive competence, positioning transnational schools as developmental spaces where national belonging and global orientation are co-constructed.

Given that this study was limited to observations in the school environment, future research should expand its scope to include the parenting ecosystem at home. This is important to see whether the dialectical strategies developed at school are supported or contradicted by parenting patterns at home. In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to track whether the hybrid cultural competencies formed at kindergarten age persist until students enter adolescence, when peer pressure becomes more complex. Ongoing follow-up research is now beginning to explore the specific impact of the use of local gadgets and social media on the accelerated acquisition of the Malay language among Indonesian diaspora children.

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