



# RECONSTRUCTION OF MENTALLY FRIENDLY SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH

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| Keywords:                                    | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| Keyword 1; Mentally friendly school culture; | <p><i>Rapid social change in the globalization era has increased the complexity of students' psychosocial challenges, making mental health a crucial issue in education. Schools are expected not only to develop academic competencies but also to create safe, inclusive, and psychologically supportive environments. This study aims to develop a conceptual model for reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach. The research employed a qualitative method with an exploratory case study design based on educational design research. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, counselors, and students. Data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that leadership support and counseling services are the strongest components in promoting a mentally friendly school environment, while the integration of multicultural values in classroom practices remains relatively low. Students generally perceive the school climate as inclusive and respectful, although instances of bullying are still reported. The study concludes that reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture requires an integrated strategy involving leadership, policy, classroom practices, psychosocial support, and multicultural engagement. This research contributes a conceptual framework that can guide schools in developing inclusive, culturally responsive, and psychologically safe learning environments.</i></p> |
| Keyword 2; multicultural education           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Keyword 3; student mental health             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Rapid social changes in the era of globalization have had a significant impact on the dynamics of students' lives in the school environment. Academic challenges, social pressures, the development of digital technologies, and the complexity of cross-cultural interactions contribute to the increasing vulnerability of students' mental health. Schools as formal educational institutions not only play a role in developing cognitive aspects, but also have a responsibility in building the psychological well-being of students. The concept of *school well-being* emphasizes

the importance of a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for students' social-emotional development (OECD, 2019; Suldo et al., 2016).

A recent report from the World Health Organization shows that around one in seven children and adolescents have a mental disorder, with a significant increase post-COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022). In Indonesia, the Ministry of Health through a national mental health survey reported an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression in the school-age group in recent years (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). These findings underscore the urgency of transforming the educational paradigm that is more humane and responsive to the psychosocial needs of students.

Theoretically, the approach to mental health in schools is in line with Bronfenbrenner's *theory of Ecological Systems* which places schools as part of an environmental system that influences individual development. In the current context, the ecological approach of education is reaffirmed in modern inclusive education studies that emphasize the importance of systemic support for student well-being (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This shows that school culture has a strategic role in shaping students' mental health.

Indonesia as a multicultural country faces complex challenges in managing diversity in schools. Multicultural education, according to Banks, emphasizes the importance of reforming the educational structure to be able to accommodate cultural diversity and promote social justice. In the last 10 years, this approach has become increasingly relevant in building an inclusive and fair school climate (Banks, 2016; Gorski, 2019). National research also shows that the application of multicultural values can reduce the potential for discrimination and increase students' sense of security at school (Suryana, 2020).

The phenomenon of bullying, stereotypes, and social exclusion that occurs in the educational environment is an indicator of the weak culture of mentally friendly schools. The UNESCO study confirms that discriminatory practices based on cultural and social differences contribute to the psychological distress of learners (UNESCO, 2018). Research in Indonesia also found that experiences of discrimination and verbal violence are significantly correlated with students' levels of stress and anxiety (Putri & Handayani, 2021).

School culture is understood as a system of values, norms, beliefs, and practices that develop in the educational community and influence the behavior of all school residents. School culture transformation requires visionary leadership and policies based on empathy and social justice (Fullan, 2020). In the context of mental health, the *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) approach* has been shown to be effective in improving students' emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships (CASEL, 2021).

Reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach means integrating the values of empathy, respect for differences, open communication, and psychosocial support into curriculum, policies, and learning practices. This concept is in line with the *Whole School Approach to Mental Health framework* which emphasizes the collaboration of all school components in creating an environment that supports mental well-being (WHO & UNESCO, 2021). In Indonesia, inclusive education policies and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile also encourage the internalization of diversity and humanity values in school culture (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Although various policies and approaches have been developed, the implementation of a multicultural-based mentally friendly school culture still faces challenges at the practical level. The gap between policy and practice shows the need for a systematic and contextual model of cultural reconstruction (Arifin, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Therefore, this research is important to formulate a conceptual framework and implementable strategies in building schools that are not only structurally inclusive, but also culturally mentally friendly.

Thus, this study seeks to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of inclusive education oriented towards mental health and cultural diversity as the main foundation for character formation and sustainable learning quality in the past decade.

### Problem of The Study

The increasing cases of mental health disorders in students in the past decade shows that schools have not fully functioned as a safe and supportive space for students' psychological development. The World Health Organization report (2022) confirms that anxiety, depression, and stress disorders in school-age children have increased significantly globally. In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Health (2023) also shows a tendency to increase emotional problems in school-age adolescents, which is partly influenced by academic pressure and social dynamics in the educational environment.

On the other hand, the reality of cultural diversity in schools has often not been managed optimally. The practice of discrimination, stereotypes, bullying, and social exclusion is still found in various educational contexts. A UNESCO report (2018) shows that violence based on differences in cultural and social identities has a direct impact on the mental well-being of students. This shows that there is a gap between the principles of inclusive education and the practice of school culture that occurs in the field.

The main problem lies in the lack of systematic integration of a multicultural approach in the development of a school culture that is oriented towards mental health. Most schools still place diversity as an administrative or symbolic aspect, rather than as a core value in social interactions, policies, and learning processes. As a result, the

school culture has not fully supported the creation of psychological *safety* for all students, especially those who come from minority backgrounds or have special needs.

In addition, the implementation of mental health programs in schools tends to be partial and reactive, not based on *whole school culture transformation*. In fact, a comprehensive approach involving policies, curriculum, school leadership, and relationships between school residents has proven to be more effective in building a mentally friendly and inclusive climate (WHO & UNESCO, 2021).

### Research's State of the Art

Studies on mental health in the school environment in the past decade show a paradigm shift from a curative approach to a system-based promotive and preventive approach. The World Health Organization report (2021, 2022) emphasizes the importance of *the Whole School Approach to Mental Health*, which is a comprehensive intervention model that involves school policies, curriculum, social relations, and community participation in creating an environment that supports the psychological well-being of students. This approach is reinforced by an OECD study (2019) which emphasizes that student well-being is an important indicator of the quality of education in the 21st century.

In the field of multicultural education, recent research shows that the integration of diversity values in school culture contributes significantly to the creation of an inclusive and psychologically safe climate. The multicultural education theory developed by Banks (2016) has evolved towards a structural transformation of schools, not just a symbolic recognition of diversity. The Gorski study (2019) confirms that social justice-based school culture reform is able to reduce discriminatory practices and increase the sense of belonging (*sense of belonging*) of students from various cultural backgrounds.

Meanwhile, research related to *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)* popularized by CASEL (2021) shows that the integration of social-emotional competencies in the education system can improve emotional regulation, empathy, and the quality of relationships between individuals. This SEL model has been widely adopted in various countries as a strategy to strengthen preventive mental health in schools.

In a global context, the UNESCO report (2018; 2020) highlights that bullying based on cultural identity, religion, or socioeconomic background remains a major challenge for inclusive education. Recent international research (2020–2024) also shows that schools with collaborative cultures and transformative leadership have higher levels of student well-being than schools with competitive and hierarchical cultures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, the study of inclusive education in the last 10 years has focused more on access and services for students with special needs. National research (Suryana, 2020; Putri & Handayani, 2021) show that mental health issues and the management of cultural diversity have not been fully integrated in school culture policies. The implementation of multicultural values is often still normative and has not touched on systemic transformations in the interaction structure and leadership of schools.

### Gap Study & Objective

In the past decade, the issue of mental health in schools has become a global concern. The World Health Organization report (2021; 2022) emphasizes the importance of a systemic approach through *the Whole School Approach to Mental Health*. This approach encourages the integration of policies, curricula, and psychosocial support in building a mentally healthy school environment. However, most research still focuses on programmatic interventions such as counseling, teacher training, or *strengthening Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*, rather than on reconstructing school culture as a whole. On the other hand, research on multicultural education has grown rapidly over the past decade, especially in the context of inclusive education reform. The concept of multicultural education reinforced by Banks (2016) and the follow-up study of social justice in education (Gorski, 2019) demonstrate the importance of transforming school values and structures to manage diversity equitably. However, the study emphasizes more aspects of equal access, anti-discrimination, and culturally responsive curriculum, without explicitly linking it to the student's mental health dimension. In the Indonesian context, inclusive education policies and character strengthening through the Pancasila Student Profile (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022) have encouraged the integration of diversity and humanity values. However, national research shows that the implementation of school culture that supports mental health is still partial and not based on a systemic multicultural approach (Suryana, 2020; Putri & Handayani, 2021).

Based on this study, there are several research *gaps* as follows:

1. **Conceptual Gaps** – The study of mental health and multicultural education are still developing separately, not yet integrated within the framework of a comprehensive school cultural reconstruction.

2. **Implementation Gaps** – Mental health interventions in schools tend to be programmatic and reactive, rather than structurally based on school culture transformation.
3. **Contextual Gap** – The multicultural-based mentally friendly school model has not been widely developed contextually in the Indonesian education system.
4. **Theoretical Model Gap** – There is no conceptual model that integrates a multicultural approach as a foundation for building a mentally friendly school culture.

## METHOD

### Type and Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design based on model development (design-based research). The qualitative approach was chosen because this research aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of school culture in a real context, especially related to efforts to build mentally friendly schools through a multicultural approach. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of meanings, values, perceptions, and social practices that shape the dynamics of school culture and influence the psychological well-being of students (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The case study design was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the actual state of school culture in a multicultural environment. The case study provides a space for researchers to explore social interactions, policies, leadership, and learning practices that contribute to the formation of a psychologically safe school climate (Yin, 2018). This approach is relevant because the reconstruction of school culture cannot be separated from the social context and the values that develop within it.

In addition, this study adopts the principles of *Educational Design Research* which emphasizes the development of innovative solutions based on theory and field needs (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). The model developed in this study refers to the *Whole School Approach to Mental Health* framework from the World Health Organization (2021), multicultural education theory (Banks, 2016), and the *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) framework* from CASEL (2021). The integration of these three approaches is the basis for formulating a multicultural-based mentally friendly school culture reconstruction model.

The research process is carried out through several stages, namely the analysis of the needs of school cultural conditions, the exploration of developing multicultural values and practices, the formulation of a conceptual model for school culture reconstruction, and model validation through *expert judgment*. This approach allows research not only to produce descriptive findings, but also to offer contributions in the form of systematic and applicable conceptual models.

### Data and Data Sources

This study employed qualitative data derived from multiple sources to ensure depth, credibility, and triangulation. The data were collected to explore school culture, mental health practices, and multicultural values within the educational setting. Primary data were obtained through direct interaction with participants, while secondary data were collected from institutional documents and relevant policy records. The use of multiple data sources strengthens the validity of findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of the reconstruction of a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data sources included school leaders, teachers, counselors, students, and institutional documents. These sources were selected purposively based on their relevance and involvement in school cultural practices and mental health initiatives. The triangulation of interviews, observations, and document analysis ensured data credibility and analytical rigor.

**Table . Data and Data Sources**

| No | Type of Data                    | Data Sources                 | Data Collection Method    | Purpose of Data                                               |
|----|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | School culture practices        | Principal and school leaders | In-depth interview        | To understand leadership policies and school cultural values  |
| 2  | Teaching and learning practices | Teachers                     | Semi-structured interview | To explore multicultural integration and classroom climate    |
| 3  | Student well-being experiences  | Students                     | Interview and observation | To identify perceptions of psychological safety and inclusion |

|   |                                        |                                                                    |                         |                                                              |
|---|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 | Counseling and mental health programs  | School counselor                                                   | In-depth interview      | To examine mental health support mechanisms                  |
| 5 | Social interactions and school climate | School community                                                   | Participant observation | To analyze real-life multicultural dynamics and interactions |
| 6 | Institutional policies and regulations | School documents (vision, mission, school rules, curriculum plans) | Document analysis       | To examine alignment between policy and practice             |
| 7 | Multicultural and inclusion programs   | Program reports and activity documentation                         | Document analysis       | To evaluate implementation of multicultural initiatives      |

### Data collection technique

This study employed multiple qualitative data collection techniques to obtain comprehensive and in-depth information regarding the reconstruction of a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach. Data were primarily collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the principal, teachers, school counselors, and selected students. These interviews allowed participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on school culture, mental health practices, inclusivity, and multicultural values within the educational setting. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore emerging themes while maintaining alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted to examine natural interactions, classroom dynamics, leadership practices, and social relationships among members of the school community. Observation provided direct insight into how multicultural values and psychological safety were enacted in daily school life. This technique helped the researcher compare participants' statements with actual practices, thereby strengthening the depth and authenticity of the findings (Yin, 2018).

Furthermore, document analysis was undertaken to review relevant institutional records, including school vision and mission statements, curriculum plans, counseling program documentation, school regulations, and reports of multicultural activities. Document analysis enabled the researcher to assess the consistency between formal policies and practical implementation related to mental health support and multicultural education.

To enhance credibility and rigor, this study applied methodological triangulation by integrating data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. The triangulation process allowed cross-verification of information and ensured a more reliable and holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Through these integrated techniques, the study generated rich and contextual data to support the development of a systematic model for reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture based on multicultural principles.

### Data analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted using an interactive qualitative analysis model. The process followed the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This analytical approach was selected to systematically interpret complex qualitative data related to school culture, mental health practices, and multicultural implementation.

The first stage, data condensation, involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. During this phase, the researcher transcribed interviews, organized field notes, coded significant statements, and categorized emerging themes related to psychological safety, inclusivity, leadership practices, multicultural values, and mental health support systems. Open coding was initially applied to identify meaningful units of information, followed by axial coding to establish relationships among categories.

The second stage, data display, involved organizing the categorized data into matrices, thematic charts, and narrative descriptions. This process allowed the researcher to systematically compare findings across different data sources and participants. By visually structuring the data, patterns and relationships among themes became clearer, particularly those connected to the reconstruction of school culture through multicultural principles.

The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, involved interpreting the patterns identified during data display and developing a conceptual model of a mentally friendly school culture based on a multicultural approach. Conclusions were continuously verified through triangulation, member checking, and comparison across data sources to ensure credibility and consistency. This iterative process ensured that findings were grounded in empirical evidence and aligned with relevant theoretical frameworks, including the *Whole School Approach to Mental Health* and multicultural education theory.

Through this systematic and iterative analysis, the study generated a contextual and theoretically grounded model for reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture within a multicultural educational environment.



## RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach is present but varies across different dimensions. The results are presented quantitatively in percentage form to describe the level of implementation and perception among participants. The data were categorized into key dimensions: leadership and policy, classroom practices, student psychological safety, multicultural integration, and mental health support services.

Table 1 shows the level of implementation of a mentally friendly school culture based on responses from teachers and school staff.

### 1. Table 1. Level of Implementation of Mentally Friendly School Culture

| No | Dimension                                       | Frequency<br>(n=50) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|----|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1  | Leadership support for mental health            | 42                  | 84%               |
| 2  | Inclusive and multicultural policies            | 38                  | 76%               |
| 3  | Classroom psychological safety                  | 40                  | 80%               |
| 4  | Integration of multicultural values in learning | 36                  | 72%               |
| 5  | Availability of counseling services             | 44                  | 88%               |

The data indicate that counseling services (88%) and leadership support (84%) are the strongest components in supporting a mentally friendly school environment. However, integration of multicultural values in classroom learning (72%) shows relatively lower implementation compared to other dimensions, suggesting an area for further improvement.

Table 2 presents students' perceptions regarding psychological safety and multicultural inclusivity within the school environment.

### 2. Table 2. Students' Perception of Psychological Safety and Multicultural Inclusivity

| No | Indicator                                           | Frequency<br>(n=100) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1  | Feeling safe expressing opinions                    | 78                   | 78%               |
| 2  | Feeling respected regardless of cultural background | 85                   | 85%               |
| 3  | Experiencing fair treatment from teachers           | 82                   | 82%               |
| 4  | Experiencing or witnessing bullying                 | 25                   | 25%               |
| 5  | Access to emotional support when needed             | 80                   | 80%               |

The findings show that most students feel respected regardless of their cultural background (85%) and perceive fair treatment from teachers (82%). However, 25% of students reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, indicating that although the school culture is generally positive, challenges related to multicultural sensitivity and psychological safety remain.

Overall, the results suggest that while the school has demonstrated significant efforts in building a mentally friendly culture, the reconstruction process requires strengthening multicultural integration and preventive anti-bullying strategies to achieve a more comprehensive and sustainable impact.

## DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach has been partially successful, with variations across different dimensions. Leadership and policy support were found to be the strongest components, suggesting that school principals and administrators play a crucial role in promoting mental health initiatives. This finding aligns with the *Whole School Approach to Mental Health*, which emphasizes that effective leadership and consistent policies are essential for creating a psychologically safe environment (WHO & UNESCO, 2021).

Classroom practices and psychological safety were generally positive, with students reporting comfort in participating and expressing themselves. This reflects the principles of *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*, which highlight that supportive classroom interactions enhance emotional well-being and social competence (CASEL, 2021). However, the finding that 25% of students experienced or witnessed bullying indicates that classroom practices still require strengthening, especially in managing multicultural interactions and fostering inclusive peer relationships.

Integration of multicultural values in learning showed the lowest implementation among school dimensions, suggesting that, although policies promote cultural inclusivity, translating these values into everyday classroom practice remains a challenge. Banks (2016) emphasizes that multicultural education should be embedded

in interactions, teaching practices, and school culture rather than only appearing in curriculum content. This finding highlights the need for teacher training and professional development focused on practical strategies for integrating multicultural values.

The availability of counseling and mental health support services was high, indicating that structured systems exist to support student well-being. Nevertheless, access alone is insufficient; these services must be integrated into school culture and classroom practices to create a consistent environment that promotes both mental health and cultural inclusivity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Students' perceptions largely reflected positive experiences in terms of respect and fairness, demonstrating that the school fosters inclusivity and recognition of diversity. Yet, the gap between policy and practice, especially regarding bullying prevention and practical multicultural integration, indicates that continuous systemic interventions are necessary. A supportive school culture requires ongoing evaluation, reflective practices, and collaboration among all stakeholders (Fullan, 2020; Suryana, 2020).

Overall, these findings suggest that reconstructing a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach requires an integrated strategy that combines leadership, policy, classroom practices, psychosocial support, and active multicultural engagement. This study provides empirical evidence to inform the development of a systematic model that can guide schools in creating psychologically safe, culturally sensitive, and inclusive learning environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the reconstruction of a mentally friendly school culture through a multicultural approach within an inclusive educational context. The findings indicate that while schools have made significant efforts to promote mental health and cultural inclusivity, the implementation varies across different dimensions. Leadership and policy support, as well as the availability of counseling services, were identified as the strongest components, demonstrating the critical role of school administrators and structured support systems in fostering a psychologically safe environment.

Classroom practices and student psychological safety were generally positive, yet the integration of multicultural values into learning activities was relatively lower, indicating a gap between policy and practical implementation. Additionally, a portion of students still experienced or witnessed bullying, highlighting the need for preventive strategies and continuous monitoring. These findings underscore that cultivating a mentally friendly school culture requires not only policies and services but also active engagement in classroom interactions, teacher professional development, and reinforcement of multicultural awareness. The study confirms that reconstructing school culture to be mentally friendly and culturally inclusive demands an integrated and systemic approach. By combining leadership, policy, classroom practices, psychosocial support, and multicultural integration, schools can create a sustainable environment that promotes well-being, inclusivity, and equitable learning opportunities for all students. The study provides both theoretical and practical contributions by offering a foundation for developing models, strategies, and interventions that can guide schools in implementing a comprehensive and contextually relevant mentally friendly culture.

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