

Intercultural Sensitivity for Bullying Prevention in Multiethnic Classrooms: A Cultural Study at Sembilanbelas November University

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Hariadi Syam, *Syarifuddin Dolla^{ab}

¹Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, Indonesia

²Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: syarifuddindollah@unm.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

Bullying in multiethnic classrooms remains a persistent challenge, particularly in educational settings where cultural diversity is not always supported by strong intercultural understanding. Previous studies have widely emphasized the importance of intercultural sensitivity for promoting inclusive learning environments; however, there is limited empirical research that examines how intercultural sensitivity is experienced and enacted in everyday classroom interactions as a mechanism for bullying prevention in higher education contexts. This study aims to explore how intercultural sensitivity contributes to bullying prevention within the culturally diverse classrooms of Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in depth interviews with students and lecturers from multiple ethnic backgrounds. The findings reveal that intercultural sensitivity supports bullying prevention by reducing stereotyping, enhancing empathy, and encouraging more respectful and constructive peer interactions. The study concludes that strengthening intercultural sensitivity is a crucial cultural approach for fostering safer and more inclusive multiethnic classroom environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying continues to be recognized as a pervasive problem in educational settings, affecting students' psychological security, academic engagement, and overall classroom climate. Olweus, one of the earliest scholars on bullying, notes that bullying thrives in environments where power imbalances and social tensions are left unaddressed, making it a serious threat to student well-being. In multiethnic classrooms, these tensions may be intensified by cultural misunderstandings or stereotypical assumptions. Banks argues that cultural diversity in education must be accompanied by culturally responsive practices, otherwise diversity can become a source of conflict rather than enrichment.

Intercultural sensitivity has been widely discussed as an essential competence for mediating cultural differences. Zelaya et al., (2024), Lan et al., (2023), and Nguyen (2023) define intercultural sensitivity as the affective capacity to acknowledge, appreciate, and respect cultural differences, emphasizing that sensitivity is foundational for effective intercultural communication. One of the most influential theoretical models underlying this concept is Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which explains how individuals gradually develop more complex and inclusive orientations toward cultural difference. According to Bennett (2017), individuals move from ethnocentric perspectives, where one's own culture is viewed as central or superior, toward ethnorelative perspectives, where cultural differences are understood, accepted, and adapted to in interpersonal interaction.

This developmental perspective helps explain why intercultural sensitivity is closely linked to social harmony in diverse learning environments. Scholars such as Arzieva (2025), Etri (2022), Fuentes & Suesca (2025) and Sahadevan & Sumangala (2021) similarly explains that individuals move through stages of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, and higher intercultural sensitivity promotes empathy, reduced stereotyping, and more constructive communication. Empirical research supports these views. Studies by Abdulla & Ali (2025), Chen & Hu (2023), Madariaga et al. (2025), and Kaçan & Yükrük (2025) show that students with higher intercultural sensitivity demonstrate greater openness and fewer negative assumptions about people from other cultures. Eden et al (2024), Sadig (2024), and Izvernar et al. (2025) also highlights that intercultural sensitivity significantly contributes to creating inclusive learning spaces by fostering respect and emotional readiness to engage in cross-cultural interactions.

Despite these insights, the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and bullying prevention has not been sufficiently explored. Basilici et al., (2022) and Nunes & Bryant (1997) found that stated that most bullying research focuses on psychological predictors such as aggression, peer pressure, and school climate, while cultural variables often receive less attention. Similarly, research by Hamsah et al., (2024) and Pouwels & Garandeau (2021) underscores peer-group dynamics but leaves room for deeper analysis of cultural elements. Only a few qualitative studies, such as those by Schachner and colleagues, indicate that culturally inclusive attitudes can reduce intergroup tensions and promote positive peer relations. This gap suggests a need for more culturally grounded investigations, particularly in higher education contexts.

The Indonesian context presents a compelling case for such analysis. Indonesia's cultural diversity is celebrated, yet studies consistently show that ethnic teasing, exclusion, and stereotyping remain common in educational settings. Research by Borualogo & Casas (2022), Kamaruddin et al. (2023), and Surahmat et al. (2024) revealed that ethnic-based bullying persists among university students, often triggered by misinterpretation of cultural expressions or localized stereotypes. In regions like Southeast Sulawesi, universities such as USN Kolaka bring together students from various ethnic groups, creating classrooms where cultural plurality is part of everyday interaction. However, without adequate intercultural sensitivity, misunderstandings may escalate into conflict or subtle forms of bullying.

Based on these considerations, the present study explores how intercultural sensitivity contributes to bullying prevention in multiethnic classrooms at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. Drawing on Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this study examines how students and lecturers interpret cultural differences, how these interpretations influence their interactions, and how intercultural sensitivity may function as a protective factor against bullying. Through in-depth interviews with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, the study seeks to provide culturally grounded insights that enrich existing literature and offer practical guidance for creating safer, more inclusive, and culturally responsive higher education environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how intercultural sensitivity contributes to bullying prevention in multiethnic university classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture participants lived experiences, interpretations, and meanings related to cultural interaction and bullying, rather than to measure predefined variables. Through in-depth interviews, the study sought to generate context sensitive insights into everyday classroom dynamics shaped by cultural diversity.

Respondents

The respondents consisted of students and lecturers from diverse ethnic backgrounds at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure meaningful representation of the major ethnic groups present on campus, including Tolaki, Buton, Muna, Bugis, and Moronene. Student participants were selected based on their active participation in multiethnic classrooms and their experiences in interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds, either through direct experience or close observation. Lecturer participants were selected based on their experience in teaching culturally diverse classes and their sustained engagement with students from multiple ethnic groups.

The number of participants was determined based on the principle of information richness and thematic saturation. Data collection continued until recurring patterns emerged and no substantially new insights were identified. This approach ensured that the findings were grounded in sufficiently varied yet conceptually consistent experiences.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed reflections on intercultural interaction and bullying related experiences. The interview questions were open ended and organized around three main areas: participants' understanding of cultural differences, their experiences of interacting in multiethnic classroom settings, and their observations of behaviors related to bullying, exclusion, or inclusion. The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature on intercultural sensitivity and bullying and was reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance. Follow up questions were used during the interviews to probe participants' responses and to explore emerging issues in greater depth..

Procedures

Data collection began after obtaining formal permission from the faculty authorities at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. Participants were contacted individually and provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and ethical considerations related to confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Interviews were conducted in quiet and private settings to create a comfortable environment for open discussion. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio recorded with participants' permission. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express their experiences and viewpoints naturally and without linguistic constraint. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. Transcripts were checked carefully against the recordings to minimize transcription errors before analysis..

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes related to intercultural sensitivity and bullying prevention. The analysis followed several systematic steps. First, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Second, significant statements and relevant segments were coded inductively based on their substantive meaning. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected shared patterns across participants. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and clear conceptual boundaries.

To enhance analytic rigor, the researcher applied constant comparison across participants and engaged in reflective memo writing throughout the analysis process. Emerging themes were examined in relation to the study's conceptual framework on intercultural sensitivity to ensure theoretical coherence. The final themes were synthesized to explain how intercultural sensitivity influences interpersonal dynamics and functions as a protective factor against bullying in multiethnic classroom contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**Findings**

The findings are organized into three major themes derived from the research questions. Each theme is further elaborated through analytically grounded subthemes supported by participants' narratives.

Intercultural Sensitivity in Multiethnic Classroom Interactions

This theme addresses how students and lecturers understand and practice intercultural sensitivity in everyday classroom settings.

Respectful and Cautious Communication

Participants consistently described intercultural sensitivity as the ability to communicate carefully in order to avoid offending others from different cultural backgrounds. Students emphasized being mindful of word choice and tone when interacting in multiethnic classrooms. One student explained:

"In our class we come from many ethnic groups, so I always try to choose my words carefully. I don't want to say something that might offend someone's culture." (P2)

This perspective indicates an awareness that language can unintentionally convey cultural judgments and that careful communication is necessary in diverse settings.

Avoidance of Cultural Stereotyping and Humor

Another key aspect of intercultural sensitivity involved avoiding jokes or comments related to ethnicity or cultural identity. Students expressed concern that humor, particularly when related to culture, could easily be misinterpreted and lead to tension. As one participant stated:

"Sometimes jokes can be misunderstood. I avoid making jokes about tribe or culture because it can create tension." (P5)

This finding suggests that students actively regulate their social behavior to prevent reinforcing stereotypes or triggering discomfort among peers.

Openness and Cultural Curiosity

Intercultural sensitivity was also understood as a willingness to learn about and respect others' cultural backgrounds. Students described efforts to understand differences in communication styles and social behavior. One student reflected:

"I try to understand my friends' cultural backgrounds. Some of them have different ways of speaking or expressing opinions, and I think we must respect that." (P3)

Lecturers reinforced these student perspectives, underscoring the pedagogical role of intercultural sensitivity in fostering inclusion. One lecturer noted:

"When students interact, I remind them to appreciate cultural differences. Sensitivity is not only about avoiding conflict but creating a space where everyone feels accepted." (L1)

Manifestations of Bullying in Multiethnic Classroom Settings

This theme captures how bullying is recognized and experienced within culturally diverse classrooms.

Subtle and Indirect Forms of Bullying

Participants reported that bullying rarely appears in overt or physical forms. Instead, it often manifests subtly through language and social interaction. One student described how accents can become targets of ridicule:

"Sometimes when someone speaks with a strong regional accent, others laugh. They say it's just for fun, but for the person speaking, it can feel hurtful." (P4)

This suggests that linguistic differences can be used to signal social hierarchy, even when framed as humor.

Social Exclusion and Ethnic Grouping

Another common form of bullying involved social exclusion based on ethnic affiliation. Students observed that peer grouping often follows ethnic lines, which can marginalize those outside dominant groups. One participant noted:

"There are times when students prefer to group only with their own ethnic friends. It is not violent, but it makes others feel left out." (P8)

Such practices contribute to social distance and may limit meaningful intercultural interaction.

Repeated Microaggressions Related to Cultural Practices

Participants also highlighted that repeated comments about cultural habits can evolve into bullying over time. A student explained:

"If someone's habit is different, like how they sit or their way of greeting, some classmates make small comments. It looks harmless, but it can become bullying when repeated." (P6)

Lecturers confirmed that bullying is often interpersonal rather than physical. One lecturer stated:

"In my classes, I rarely see physical bullying. What I see more often is teasing, isolating someone, or using language that targets cultural identity." (L2)

These findings indicate that bullying in multiethnic classrooms is often embedded in everyday interactions and may go unnoticed if subtle behaviors are not critically examined.

Intercultural Sensitivity as a Preventive Strategy Against Bullying

This theme explores how intercultural sensitivity functions as a protective factor that reduces bullying behavior.

Perspective Taking and Emotional Regulation

Students explained that intercultural sensitivity helps them manage their reactions by considering others' cultural perspectives. One student shared:

"Before reacting, I try to think from their cultural point of view. Sometimes what looks rude to me is normal in their culture. That helps me not respond negatively." (P7)

This reflects the role of reflective communication in preventing conflict escalation.

Prevention of Misunderstanding and Conflict Escalation

Participants emphasized that cultural understanding reduces misinterpretation of behavior, thereby preventing minor conflicts from developing into bullying. As one student noted:

"When we know more about our friends' cultures, we don't easily misunderstand their behavior. That reduces small conflicts that could turn into bullying." (P1)

This finding highlights the importance of cultural awareness in maintaining harmonious interactions.

Peer Intervention and Collective Responsibility

Intercultural sensitivity also encouraged students to intervene when they observed culturally insensitive behavior. One participant explained:

"If someone makes a joke about ethnicity, I try to remind them politely. I don't want it to become bullying." (P9)

Lecturers similarly noted that fostering intercultural awareness in the classroom helps create an atmosphere that discourages discriminatory behavior. One lecturer explained:

"When students understand diversity and respect each other, bullying has less space to grow. Sensitivity makes them more careful and more empathetic." (L3)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that intercultural sensitivity functions not only as a communication skill but also as a preventive social mechanism. Through perspective taking, respectful interaction, and peer accountability, intercultural sensitivity contributes to reducing bullying and fostering a more inclusive and psychologically safe learning environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that intercultural sensitivity strongly influences how students navigate interpersonal interactions and manage potential conflicts within multiethnic classrooms at USN Kolaka. Students and lecturers perceived intercultural sensitivity as respect for cultural differences, thoughtful communication, and a willingness to

understand diverse perspectives. These perceptions closely reflect the conceptual framework proposed by Chen and Starosta who in 1996 and 2000 identified intercultural sensitivity as an affective disposition that shapes an individual's openness and responsiveness toward cultural differences.

The results further support Bennett's theory (1993) noted that sensitivity to cultural differences helps individuals move from ethnocentric thinking toward a more ethnorelative worldview. The student narratives in this study, particularly those describing careful word choice and avoidance of ethnic jokes, echo Bennett's argument that intercultural sensitivity encourages individuals to regulate their behavior in culturally diverse environments.

The interview data also indicated that bullying in multiethnic classrooms tends to manifest in subtle relational forms such as exclusion, microaggressions, and repeated comments about language or cultural habits. This pattern aligns with previous findings from Hunt et al., (2025) and Morrison et al., (2023) who emphasized that microaggressions are common in multicultural educational settings and often operate beneath the threshold of overt discrimination.

Studies by Dobai & Hopkins (2020) and Ford et al., (2020) also demonstrated that cultural teasing and stereotype based humor frequently appear in diverse social groups and can contribute to exclusionary climates. The present study reinforces these conclusions by showing that students recognize these forms of subtle aggression as harmful even when they are framed as casual interaction.

The data also reveal that intercultural sensitivity functions as a protective factor against bullying. Students explained that self awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation helped them prevent misunderstandings and negotiate cultural differences more constructively. This is consistent with the work of Gebregergis & Csukonyi (2025) and Said (2024) who found that higher intercultural competence is associated with reduced intergroup conflict. Similarly, findings by Cheung et al (2022) and Domínguez et al (2025) indicated that individuals with strong intercultural sensitivity demonstrate greater perspective taking and are less likely to engage in discriminatory behavior.

Research on bullying prevention also supports this relationship. Hidayati et al (2025) Hikmat et al (2024) argued that empathy and cultural awareness are key components of successful anti bullying initiatives. The present findings reinforce these observations by showing that students who practiced culturally informed communication were more inclined to intervene when peers made insensitive or exclusionary remarks.

Lecturers in this study also played a central role in shaping classroom norms that discourage bullying. Lunda et al., (2024) and Juang & Hwang (2024) emphasizes the need for educators to validate diverse cultural identities and to create inclusive learning environments. The findings also align with research by Ghaemi & Boroushaki (2025) and Maulani et al., (2025) who demonstrated that multicultural teaching practices can significantly reduce cultural misunderstanding and conflict in ethnically diverse classrooms.

In synthesis, the data illustrate a clear relationship between intercultural sensitivity and bullying prevention. Students who demonstrate affective openness toward cultural differences are more capable of interpreting ambiguous behavior, reducing conflict, and fostering inclusive peer interactions. This supports Acar et al., (2024), Tropp et al., (2022) and Visintin et al., (2020) which found that positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice when supported by empathy and equal respect. The insights from this study extend previous theories by illustrating how intercultural sensitivity directly shapes day to day interactions among students and how it mitigates subtle, relational bullying forms within multiethnic academic environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how intercultural sensitivity is understood and practiced in multiethnic university classrooms and how it relates to bullying prevention. The findings show that both students and lecturers view intercultural sensitivity as an essential part of

everyday classroom interaction. It is reflected in respectful attitudes, careful use of language, and a willingness to understand cultural differences. Rather than being seen as an abstract idea, intercultural sensitivity emerges as a practical and meaningful skill that shapes how individuals communicate and relate to one another in culturally diverse learning environments. The study also found that bullying in multiethnic classrooms tends to occur in subtle and indirect forms rather than through overt aggression. Participants described behaviors such as mocking accents, social exclusion, and repeated comments about cultural habits as common expressions of bullying. These behaviors are often perceived as stemming from cultural misunderstanding rather than deliberate intent to harm. This suggests that bullying in diverse classrooms is closely connected to everyday social interactions and highlights the importance of recognizing how seemingly minor actions can affect students' sense of belonging. Importantly, the findings indicate that intercultural sensitivity plays a preventive role in reducing bullying. By encouraging perspective taking, emotional awareness, and respectful communication, intercultural sensitivity helps students and lecturers respond more thoughtfully to cultural differences. It also supports peer intervention and shared responsibility for maintaining a positive classroom climate. Overall, this study highlights the value of intercultural sensitivity in fostering inclusive and psychologically safe higher education environments and underscores the need to strengthen cultural awareness as part of daily academic practice.

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