

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Education has faced difficulties in the current era, as these have become more complicated because of changing societal values and the highly dynamic nature of cultural diversity. Under such circumstances, it becomes imperative to devise an education system aimed not only at academic success but also at developing students' personalities. A country like Indonesia, with its multicultural society having varied ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds, ensures that character-building is one of the most fundamental foundations (Jayadi et al., 2022; Machmud & Alim, 2018). Therefore, the role of education is crucial to help students develop their character and become better individuals with values of responsibility, respect, empathy, tolerance, and social awareness (Ardana et al., 2017; Landrum et al., 2019; Nurmanita et al., 2019). In short, the key to making students capable of living harmoniously in society is the active role of schools.

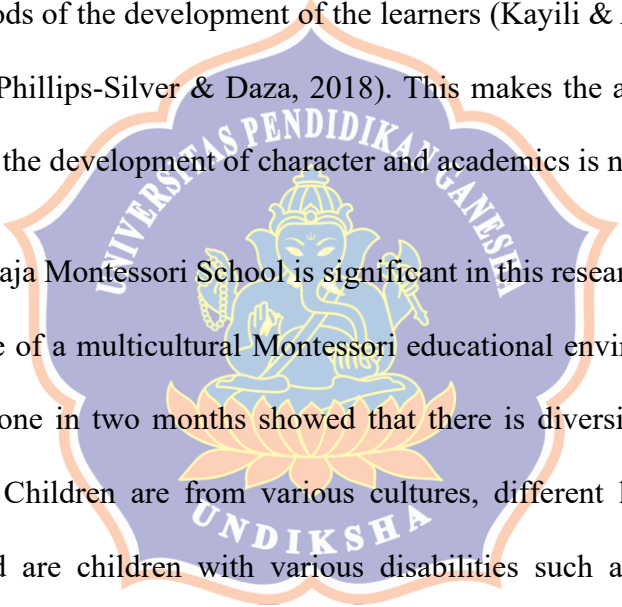
Character development is urgent because of social problems in children and adolescents in school environments. Bullying cases can frequently occur, and therefore character education must become one of the key issues in elementary education. According to the PISA 2022 report, it was noted that about 25% of girls and 30% of boys in Indonesia had faced cases of bullying. This indicates that problems exist regarding the development of character traits like empathy, respect, and other positive traits among children. Several scholars have emphasized the role of empathy and social and emotional competencies to understand the feelings of

others, control of emotions, appreciation of diversity, and maintenance of good social relations (Cantika & Utama, 2025; Safitri & Utama, 2025; Sofiawati et al., 2025; Sultan & Khan, 2025). Social problems indicate that character development should be a part of the everyday teaching process.

Developing children's character traits becomes even harder in multicultural or inclusive classrooms. In the context of multicultural education, appreciating differences and employing learning strategies that respect students' culture, language, religion, and social background becomes crucial (Ambarudin, 2016; Aprilianto, 2019; Maa'arif & Arifin, 2021). Additionally, inclusion refers to ensuring equal educational opportunities to all students, including those with special needs, who get to study in regular classrooms with other students (Hassanein et al., 2021; Sahli Lozano et al., 2022). Implementation of the approach is difficult and faces various obstacles, including lack of preparation among teachers, insufficient facilities, lack of assistance, and the need for adaptability of learning methods (Hata et al., 2021; Rahmi et al., 2024). When it comes to an inclusive class, character education involves work on respect, acceptance of differences, and positive interaction between both regular and special needs students (Meliani & Sati, 2023). These problems show that character development needs to be integrated into daily teaching practice, not just taught separately as moral material.

One form of education relevant in this situation is the Montessori education method. This method incorporates child-centeredness in the learning process, preparation of the environment, freedom under certain limits, individuality, practical activities, and respect for the process of development. Using this approach,

children gain knowledge through direct experiences and guided activities. The aim of using this approach is to support child development and ensure that individuals are independent, responsible, self-confident, and make decisions through intrinsic motivation (Scott & Myers, 2021). Using this approach ensures that every learner chooses activities based on their interests and needs, and therefore supports independent and meaningful learning (Mavric, 2020). This method has been seen to be successful in developing the attributes of the student, including independence, responsibility, choice and freedom, and self-confidence that develop during the sensitive periods of the development of the learners (Kayili & Ari, 2011; Lillard & Heise, 2016; Phillips-Silver & Daza, 2018). This makes the approach relevant in classes where the development of character and academics is needed.



Singaraja Montessori School is significant in this research because it serves as an example of a multicultural Montessori educational environment. The initial observation done in two months showed that there is diversity in the classroom environment. Children are from various cultures, different languages, different countries, and are children with various disabilities such as Down syndrome, autism, delayed speech, learning disabilities, dyslexia and many others. Moreover, the school has a multi-age classroom system that includes Octopus and United (1-3 grade) and Rainbow (4-6 grade). The multi-age system corresponds to the Montessori philosophy, where there is a great value in peer learning and interaction between the ages. Nevertheless, this diversity is a challenge for teachers because students in one class are different.

Previous studies have discussed Montessori education in the context of children's cognitive and social development. Several studies have also shown that the Montessori method supports independence, social interaction, and children's learning development. However, studies specifically examining how Montessori teaching strategies support children's character development in multicultural and inclusive classrooms remain limited. Furthermore, there is limited research examining the challenges teachers face in managing student diversity in Montessori environments that utilize multi-age classroom systems. Therefore, this study aims to investigate teachers' teaching strategies and challenges across diverse Montessori environments, thereby providing new insights into the development of Montessori-based character education in a multicultural and inclusive classroom.

1.2 Problem Identification

Based on preliminary observations conducted at Singaraja Montessori School, specifically in the Octopus class, several research questions have been identified.

1. Differences in students' learning needs and abilities

The Octopus class includes a heterogeneous group of students who differ in their abilities, readiness to learn, speed of learning, and needs. This variety creates a challenge for teachers as they cannot address all the students through identical instruction methods. They need to change their approach to work with different students and use different strategies, materials, instructions, and support so they can engage actively and meaningfully in the lesson. This makes the problem even more complicated, since character development should arise organically from daily interactions and activities.

2. Challenges in Managing a Multicultural Classroom

The Octopus classroom also comprises students coming from diverse cultures, languages, and countries. Their diversity influences the way they interact and relate in class. Teachers should be able to establish an environment characterized by empathy and cooperation. The problem is how teachers can handle differences in culture and language such that all students would feel appreciated and encouraged to participate in class activities. Thus, this topic is significant to find out how Montessori teaching approaches can help shape children's character in a multicultural classroom.

3. The Complexity of the Multi-Age Classroom System in Learning

The use of the multi-age classroom system in the Octopus classroom is another problem for teachers. It means that students in different grades are educated in one classroom, which leads to different degrees of development in terms of cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral factors. This means that teaching strategies need to be more flexible and appropriate to students' developmental stages.

4. Limitations of Teachers' Background in Special Education in the Context of Inclusive Classrooms

Although teachers in the Octopus classroom should have been able to support different students without any knowledge of special education, they face one major limitation that they must consider when dealing with the diversity of students in their classroom. This limitation is that teachers

should be aware of the needs of different children, and therefore more research on the matter is required.

1.3 Limitations of the Research

This study focuses on the application of the Montessori method in supporting children's character development in multicultural and inclusive elementary school classrooms, specifically in the Octopus class at Singaraja Montessori School. This class was selected because it represents a multi-age classroom system comprising students in Grades 1–3 with diverse backgrounds, cultures, learning abilities, and special needs. This class was chosen because it is relevant to the research focus, as it provides a real-world context for examining how strategic Montessori teaching is applied to support children's character development in a highly diverse learning environment. A limitation of this study lies in the teacher's perspective, as teachers are the primary agents responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating teaching strategies in the classroom.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What teaching strategies are used by teachers to support the character development of students from diverse backgrounds and students with special needs?
2. What are the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method to develop children's character in a multicultural and inclusive classroom?

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To find out the teaching strategies used by teachers to support the character development of students from diverse backgrounds and students with special needs.
2. To find out the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the Montessori method to develop children's character in a multicultural and inclusive classroom.

1.6 Significance of the Research

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

In theory, this research contributes to the development of research on the relationships among the Montessori Method, character education, multicultural education, and inclusive education. The results of this study are expected to provide insight into the strategies that can be used to handle a diverse classroom context and the challenges that arise in a diverse classroom. This research is expected to serve as a foundation for further research aimed at integrating multicultural and inclusive perspectives.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

For Teachers: This research is expected to provide new insights for teachers in designing appropriate and adaptive learning strategies that address student diversity and their special needs, particularly in developing the character of students. Furthermore, this research is also expected to provide insight into the challenges teachers face when teaching in a classroom with diverse students in developing children's character.

For Schools: This research is expected to serve as a reference for schools in creating inclusive and diverse learning environments.

For further research: The results of this study are expected to assist in further research and serve as a reference for implementing the Montessori method in multicultural and inclusive contexts.

