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Creating Multicultural Citizens. A Portrayal of contemporary Indonesian Education.

In the aftermath of the downfall of the authoritarian New Order and the subsequent initial phase of embracing democracy, Indonesia faced very disturbing circumstances when racial, ethnic, and religious tensions inspired bloody violence in several places including: Jakarta, where the Chinese-Indonesians were brutally massacred, Maluku (conflicts between Muslims and Christians), Poso (also conflicts between Muslims and Christians), and West Kalimantan (conflicts between Malay and Dayak locals and Madurese settlers). In other parts of the country the tensions were also high and the magnitude of the conflicts was so immense that many feared Indonesia would soon break up. Both tactful security and social approaches by state apparatus and wise and patient community and religious leaders gradually reduced the violence. Peace agreements and law enforcements were put in place, although they did not always meet expectations.

Creating Multicultural Citizens: A Portrayal of Contemporary Indonesian Education, looks into education, a sector that has not been touched upon by most Indonesianists when they tried to build up grounded theories and seek formula to help the country really undergo smooth democratization and create multicultural citizens. Indeed, every enactment of educational reform will not pay off in the near future and not everyone seems patient enough to wait. Nevertheless, the choice of positioning the education sector as an initial zone for creating multicultural citizens is more than strategic, as education can be either an agent of social change or promote the status-quo, and the sort of mentality that teachers cultivated in their students would shape what kind of society we would become in the future.

This book is a result of three years of research, which includes fieldwork, more than enough for a reliable qualitative work. The author discusses the difference between multiculturalism in the West, which, he argues, is made up with the influx of migration and indigenous people, whereas multiculturalism in Indonesia, would be made up by various and diverse ethnicities from within. He later criticizes education reforms, including efforts to improve quality and policies on multiculturalism, which he perceives reflect ‘a lack of understanding on the part of the policy makers towards multiculturalism’ (p. 84). In later chapters, he focuses on school practices using case studies to see how such policies are translated into practices to create multicultural citizens.
The author’s research fieldwork covered six schools as case studies: The Enlightened: Islamic Boarding School Yogyakarta (IBSY), Creativity: State Vocational School Yogyakarta (SVSY), Averroes: Muhammadiyah Secondary Palangkaraya (MSPR), St Peter: Catholic Secondary Palangkaraya (CSPR), Rose Garden: State Secondary Palangkaraya (SSPR) and Voice of Islam: State Islamic School Palangkaraya (SISPR). He sent out preliminary surveys to all 1,045 students of the schools to complement his mostly qualitative work. He also sent out surveys to four other schools, totaling 622 more students. Focus Group Discussion (FDG) and in-depth interviews were applied with more than 100 students, 80 teachers, and 6 school principals to assert their perception on how multicultural attitudes are implemented at schools. The author discovers that school leadership plays an essential role in shaping multicultural attitudes. He unveils that ‘The principals in Rose Garden (SSPR), Averroes (MSPR), Voice of Islam (SISPR), and Creativity (SVSY) demonstrated leadership qualities and practices which are promising in the development of multicultural education’ (pp. 107–108).

Chapter 6 focuses on teaching religion. Before 1965, teaching religion was not compulsory. But after the severe rivalry between the communists (who wanted to abolish religion at school) and the military (who persuaded Islamists to promote religion as a compulsory subject at school) and the subsequent triumph of the military-backed New Order over the communists, religious subjects became compulsory at school. Hence, according to educational law, schools have to provide students with religious teachers. Some argued that the policy would further segregate the society along religious lines. In practice, however, the author found out that inconsistency can be seen as schools failed to provide religious teachers, particularly for minorities.

In Chapter 7, the author discusses the importance of extracurricular activities, which he argues ‘helped to develop interreligious understanding and tolerance among students’ (pp. 148–149). However, those activities were specifically designed for their own purposes, not to promote religious tolerance, although exposure to religious understanding was developed during the activities. He argues that these extracurricular activities could be a double-edged sword because radical, intolerant religious elements can have a chance to penetrate into the activities and gradually influence students. He argues that in order to really benefit from these extracurricular activities, schools should devise a well-planned method to promote religious tolerance within the activities, thus also minimizing the possibility of a penetration of unwanted elements from outside of school.

The author also seeks to understand the ideal society from the eyes of students. He discovers that although the majority of students see the ideal society