

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has become a central global issue as nations increasingly grapple with religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Jiet al., 2025). Around the world, societies are confronted with challenges such as intolerance, ethnoreligious conflict, and violent extremism, underscoring the urgent need for educational systems to promote mutual respect, peace, and intercultural understanding (Zamora et al., 2025; Hamdan et al., 2022). Indonesia, often celebrated for its long-standing multicultural heritage, is frequently cited as an example of how plural societies can coexist peacefully (Aspinall & Berger, 2001; Hefner, 2009, 2018). Its rich mosaic of cultures and religions positions it as a model for global discourse on pluralism and coexistence (Ruslan et al., 2025). However, this diversity, even as a national asset, also presents risks when not properly managed, including the potential for horizontal conflicts, intolerance, and social fragmentation (Bruinessen, 1990). Within Indonesia, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) represent a unique microcosm of this national diversity (Zaluchuet al., 2025). Their communal living system requires students to share spaces, responsibilities, and daily routines, demanding continuous interpersonal adaptation (Rasyid et al., 2022). Previous research highlights the importance of cultivating tolerance and intercultural sensitivity in this context to maintain harmonious social interaction (Wahid, 2014; Rohman et al., 2025). Despite a shared religious identity, students in pesantren often come from highly diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, creating potential for misunderstandings or conflict. Studies warn that unaddressed diversity can escalate into violence or bullying (Barton et al., 2021), and documented reports have revealed recurring cases of aggression and harassment within Indonesian pesantren (Rahmatullah et al., 2020; Ru'iyah, 2019). These findings indicate that pesantren environments require culturally responsive management approaches to ensure that diversity becomes an enriching force rather than a source of tension. The province of Bengkulu exemplifies regions where multicultural dynamics are particularly

pronounced. Its ethnically diverse communities require strong multicultural understanding to sustain social cohesion (Rasyid et al., 2022). In pesantren across Bengkulu, students live collectively in dormitories, making cultural sensitivity and effective governance especially crucial (Susanto et al., 2025). Without structured multicultural management, issues such as bullying, mockery, discrimination, and violence may emerge (Bamashmous & Meisha, 2025; Barton et al., 2021). Media reports increasingly highlight cases of violence and unethical behavior in pesantren (Ru'iyah, 2019), underscoring weaknesses in supervision, the limited integration of multicultural values, and insufficient support for students navigating intercultural interactions (Nieto, 2017; Anet al., 2025). National data reinforce these concerns: 36% of school-related violence cases in 2024 occurred in faith-based institutions, with Islamic schools and pesantren accounting for significant proportions of sexual violence, bullying, and discriminatory practices. These issues disproportionately affect female students, revealing deep gender imbalances and urgent gaps in student protection. Despite these challenges, pesantren in Bengkulu continue to grow, reflecting strong community trust and demand for religious-based education. Studies show that pesantren across Indonesia, including those in Bengkulu, are expanding in number and diversity of models, from traditional institutions to internationally oriented boarding schools (Lukens-Bull, 2019; Iqbal, 2023). Public interest remains high, as noted by Parker and Raihani (2011), with institutions such as Muhammadiyah Boarding School (MBS) and the rapidly developing Pesantren Ihya'ul Qur'an serving as prominent examples (Amrullah et al., 2024). Pesantren Ihya'ul Qur'an, led by Ustadz Herman, has demonstrated noteworthy institutional growth, establishing affiliated educational units and supporting students' academic mobility to leading institutions such as Al-Azhar University, Middle Eastern universities, and LIPIA (Bright & Heyting, 2024; Bolen et al., 2025). Its integration of Arabic and English (Ardinal, 2017) attracts students from diverse ethnic and cultural

groups across Bengkulu and South Sumatra, making it a highly multicultural educational setting.