

The Philosophy of Multicultural Education as a Foundation for Strengthening the Literacy and Identity of Banda Neira Children

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Abstract

Banda Neira has a central role in the birth of Indonesia as a country with the motto of Bhineka Tunggal ika. Banda Neira is often positioned as the "zero point" of colonialism as well as a laboratory of Indonesian multiculturalism. With a history of genocide, forced migration, and complex new identity formation, on the other hand Banda shows how to validate trauma while celebrating resilience and hope. In the context of multicultural education, in Banda Neira we can learn about diversity but also respects unity. Glorifying the heritage of history, as well as moving forward in a coherent education according to the uncertain demands of global education. In this context, early grade reading literacy can be used as a crucial space to reconstruct historical memory, manage trauma, resilience, and foster pride in the identity of Banda children who live in a plural reality. This paper examines multicultural education in Banda Neira from the perspective of educational philosophy, especially the ideas of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Freire, and relates it to the practice of early grade reading literacy and the gap between conceptual-ideals and realities in the field. In particular, the analysis is directed at the phenomenon of Banda children who are familiar with the tagline "don't die before going to Banda Neira", but do not necessarily internalize the philosophical and historical meaning behind the pride. With a qualitative-reflective approach based on literature review, this article shows that Freire's dialogical and critical multicultural education, starting with early grade reading literacy, has the potential to transform popular slogans into historical awareness, resilient collective identities, and liberating pedagogical praxis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Banda Neira is often referred to as the zero point of Indonesian colonialism. This is due to the history of colonial violence, the nutmeg economy, and demographic engineering that left a long social legacy (Hanna, 1983; Historia, 2025). The 1621 genocide killed tens of thousands of native Bandanese. At that time, mass deportations to Batavia occurred. Nutmeg workers were brought in from Java, Sulawesi, Ambon, Malaya, and China. This made Banda a miniature of extreme pluralism as well as a space for social experimentation that shaped a new Bandanese identity (Kompas, 2022; Kompasiana, 2019). Because of this genocide, of the 14,000 original inhabitants, only around 1,000 remain. The island is now home to diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures that live side by side in a unique pluralistic order (Hanna, 1983; Kompas, 2022). The various traditional rituals held

annually to this day make this ritual not merely cultural, but a space for shared learning across religions and ethnicities. For example, the “Buka Kampung” tradition or striped boat race, which is an annual event, is still regularly held by traditional villages in Banda.

The people of Banda today are mostly immigrants, known as Bandanese. Bandanese identity is shaped by a blend of heritage, traditions, and a spirit of mutual respect within a pluralistic society. Museums, cultural houses, and the exile of national figures further strengthen residents' ties to local history. These places serve as a kind of classroom where periods of resistance are studied and remembered.

In this context, education is not simply a matter of transferring knowledge. It is also interpreted as a philosophical space for cultivating collective memory, reconciling history, fostering community resilience, and forming a critical multicultural identity (Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 2018). Multicultural education in Banda ideally integrates local ancestral history, colonial trauma, and everyday life practices into learning. Early grade reading literacy is a key foundation for understanding the world. Mastering early grade literacy also helps students understand themselves and the communities in which they live (Freire, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Dewey's educational thinking on contextual education serves as the theoretical foundation for this research. Furthermore, Piaget's concept of cognitive schema formation provides a framework for discussion within the scope of student development. The discussion is enriched by the importance of social interaction in Vygotsky's learning. Analyzing how children learn using Bandura's social model and observations will enhance understanding of how curriculum and teacher strategies can help students become contextual learners. Finally, Freire's thoughts on dialogical and critical education make the class rich in stories that will be used as a sharpening knife (Freire, 1997; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986).

On the other hand, the younger generation of Banda grew up with the tagline "Don't die before you go to Banda Neira," which is a powerful symbol of local pride, spread through tourism and social media (Kompasiana, 2019; Tempo, 2023). Most children in Banda Neira understand and memorize this slogan. They repeat it with pride, even wearing T-shirts with it. However, the philosophical question is: do they truly grasp the historical and ethical meaning behind the slogan? Or are they merely quoting its meaning superficially? The biggest pedagogical challenge is how to transform symbolic pride into critical awareness supported by reading literacy and historical understanding.

Without reflective and dialogical pedagogical interventions from the early grades, local pride risks becoming an empty romanticization, rather than transforming into critical awareness supported by reading skills. This includes both textbooks and formal non-textual reading, or the "socio-historical texts" of Banda itself. From a philosophical perspective, early grade reading literacy should not simply be a practice of decoding letters or reading fluency, but rather an arena for developing historical awareness, critical thinking skills, obtaining information, using information, and internalizing substantive multicultural values. Solutions to this problem are mapped out, including the integration of local history into early literacy materials, contextualized teacher training, and the development of reflective and dialogical learning practices to open up space for children's critical inquiry in the first grades of elementary school.

This article aims to critically examine how educational philosophy, through the study of the thoughts of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Freire, can be applied to formulate multicultural education in Banda Neira. This discussion focuses specifically on early grade reading literacy as the primary entry point for children to understand identity, history, and plurality in Banda Neira society.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-reflective approach based on literature review and hermeneutics, focusing on multicultural education and early grade reading literacy in Banda Neira. The primary data sources come from the works of educational philosophers such as Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Freire, as well as historical documents, sociological studies, and narratives of local figures related to Banda (Hanna, 1983; Des Alwi, 2006; Kompas, 2022; Historia, 2025). Additionally, journalistic articles, online media coverage, and community writings such as Kompasiana (2019), Tempo (2023), and Republika (2022) were selected to enrich insights into the educational and literacy contexts taking place in Banda Neira.

Data were collected through literature review and document review, by exploring relevant primary and secondary literature in the fields of philosophy education, local history, and elementary school literacy policy. All documents were analyzed to identify their themes and relevance, and systematically classified in a synthesis matrix with source tagging according to APA 7 citation rules. The document review was conducted in depth to ensure the validity and topicality of the sources, prioritizing scientific books and trusted publications.

The data analysis process was conducted using hermeneutic techniques. Each source was read as an open text that was repeatedly interpreted and linked to the philosophical framework of multicultural education and critical literacy. The researchers also positioned themselves reflectively to bridge the relationship between educational theory, field practice in early grade reading literacy, and the collective memory of the Banda community. The final focus of the analysis was directed at early grade reading literacy as the primary space where Banda Neira children first understand the world and local history through the process of learning to "read words" (Freire, 1997).

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Banda Neira as a Multicultural Space and Ground Zero of Colonialism

The history of Banda Neira shows how colonial violence destroyed the old social order, eradicating the native population and replacing it with a new social structure based on nutmeg plantations managed by the Dutch East India Company (Hanna, 1983; Historia, 2025). Following the genocide and deportation, the Dutch East India Company brought in groups from various regions, such as Java, Sulawesi, Ambon, Malay, Chinese, and European, who then lived in patterns of initial segregation, but simultaneously formed a plural and resilient Bandanese identity (Kompas, 2022; Kompasiana, 2019).

From the perspective of educational philosophy, this context demonstrates that education is never neutral. It always confronts legacies of power, trauma, and identity negotiations (Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 2018). Banda is an extreme example of how children's learning spaces are shaped not only by schools, but also by colonial architecture, everyday language, inter-community religious rituals, and family narratives about the past that often do not make it into official textbooks. The city of Banda Neira itself is an open-air museum; the VOC forts, the Hatta-Sjahrir exile house, and the basalt cobblestone streets become visual texts that "speak" of history, but can only be understood if children are equipped with literacy, both reading written texts and reading social and historical spaces.

3.2 Philosophical Foundations of Multicultural Education: From Dewey to Freire

The theoretical foundations of multicultural education in Banda can be drawn from several key thinkers relevant to the context of early grade reading literacy.

John Dewey views education as a social process that prepares citizens for life in a
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democratic society, so schools must be a miniature of social life that values diversity and dialogue (Dewey, 1938). In Banda, this means classes not only teach historical facts by rote, but also invite students to participate in conversations across identities, religions, and family memories through shared reading and text discussions.

Jean Piaget emphasizes that children construct knowledge through active interaction with their environment; knowledge is not simply transferred, but constructed gradually through cognitive schemas (Piaget, 1964). If literacy in Banda presents Maluku folktales, deportation stories, and colonial traces in language and visualizations accessible to children, then children form cognitive schemas that are directly related to the realities of their lives, not merely abstract memorization of national history that is far removed from their experiences.

Lev Vygotsky added that learning is always social; in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), children are guided through interactions with teachers, peers, and the community (Vygotsky, 1978). Early grade reading literacy in Banda can utilize this social scaffolding by involving community leaders, such as teachers who understand local history, or even figures like Des Alwi, who have taught the children. Thus, reading is not a solitary activity, but a social practice that connects children to the community and collective history, transforming the classroom into a storytelling space.

Albert Bandura shows that children learn through observation and modeling. Teachers, local figures, and community leaders such as Hatta, Sjahrir, and Des Alwi provide concrete examples of how to live together in an egalitarian manner despite differences (Bandura, 1986; Des Alwi, 2006). When children read simple biographies of Hatta and Sjahrir, who were exiled in Banda and then teach local children regardless of their background, they learn the values of tolerance and equality not from lectures, but from stories they can internalize.

The peak, **Paulo Freire presents** a liberatory educational framework that rejects the "banking model" (a bank-style educational model in which teachers "deposit" knowledge into students' heads) and replaces it with dialogic education that dismantles structures of oppression and fosters critical consciousness (Freire, 1997; Santos, 2022). In the Banda context, dialogic education presupposes the classroom as a place where students ask questions about their origins, interpret family experiences, and critique official narratives about colonialism, tourism, and "Bandanese" identity (Freire, 1997). Freire's early-grade literacy approach is not simply about teaching letters, but rather about teaching children to "read the world," understanding the social, political, and historical contexts surrounding the texts they read (Freire, 1997).

3.3 Early Grade Reading Literacy as an Arena for Forming Historical Awareness

Early grade reading literacy in elementary schools is generally understood as the process of teaching children to read.

recognizing letters, reading words, and understanding simple sentences. However, from the perspective of multicultural educational philosophy and Freire's theory, early grade reading literacy should be more than that: it is the first arena where children learn to "read the world" before "reading words," and then "reading words" to better understand the "world" (Freire, 1997).

In Banda Neira, this context is particularly relevant. Banda children grow up amidst a rich historical landscape: colonial forts, exile homes, the Des Alwi museum, and oral narratives about ancestors who came from various islands. However, if early grade literacy only teaches generic texts from national textbooks that don't address local context, children miss out on opportunities to understand themselves and their

communities through reading.

Early grade reading materials should include short texts about the history of Banda, the story of the exiled Hatta–Sjahrir teaching local children, Maluku folklore, and even a simple analysis of the slogan “don’t die before going to Banda Neira” so that from an early age, children connect reading skills with an understanding of identity and collective memory. Thus, early grade reading literacy is not only a technical skill, but also a process of forming historical awareness and multicultural identity (Freire, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978).

3.4 The Tagline "Don't Die Before You Get to Banda Neira": Local Pride and the Pedagogical Challenges of Early Grade Literacy

In recent years, the tagline "don't die before you go to Banda Neira" has become a new icon, embedded in the imaginations of children and teenagers in Banda (Kompasiana, 2019; Tempo, 2023). This slogan appears on t-shirts, travel narratives, social media, and everyday conversations, thus becoming part of the symbolic habitus of the younger generation. It marks Banda as a place worthy of pride and celebration.

Sociologically, the fact that most children in Banda Neira understand and memorize this tagline demonstrates that pride in Banda is deeply rooted and inherent in them. This is invaluable social and psychological capital. It encompasses a sense of belonging to a place, pride in local identity, and an awareness that Banda holds special value recognized by outsiders. However, philosophically and pedagogically, the question is: to what extent do the children of Banda understand the meaning they reproduce? Is the slogan merely a sound, or has it become a gateway to historical and ethical awareness?

If not cultivated pedagogically through critical early-grade reading literacy, local pride can easily degenerate into empty romanticism. Pride in "living in a place sought after by many," without understanding that the space they inhabit is built on layers of trauma from genocide, deportation, and historical injustice. This is where multicultural education and early-grade reading literacy become crucial: teachers and schools can utilize this tagline as a starting text to explore with students in reading and discussion activities.

Freire's dialogic literacy approach allows this slogan to be treated as a primer to be "unpacked" together through simple critical questions in early grades (Freire, 1997; Santos, 2022). For example, a teacher could begin a reading lesson by displaying the phrase "don't die before you reach Banda Neira" on the board or word cards, then inviting the children to:

1. Read along with the sentence (practice decoding and reading fluency)
2. Discuss key words: "die", "Banda Neira", "before" (enrich vocabulary)
3. Relating to a simple question: "Why do people say don't die before going to Banda Neira? What makes Banda special? Who lived in Banda before? Who came later?"
4. Reading short texts about the history of Banda (adapted to grades 1-3 of elementary school)
5. Connecting with student experiences: "What are you proud of about Banda? Are your grandparents from Banda or from another island?"

In this way, the process of learning to read not only develops letter decoding skills but also enriches children's understanding of their own history and their environment. Children learn that pride in Banda is not just about its panoramas and tourist popularity, but also about respect for collective memory, empathy for marginalized groups, and a commitment to preserving the island's heritage of pluralism (Banks, 2009; Des Alwi, 2006).

From the perspective of educational philosophy, this process is praxis. It connects popular cultural symbols with the historical structures and power relations that underlie them (Freire, 1997). Children learn that pride is not just a feeling, but also a responsibility to understand who they are, where they come from, and how they will live together in diversity. Thus, the meaning of "don't die before going to Banda Neira" is drawn from the tourist level to become a life ethos: don't stop thinking critically before understanding who you are and where you come from.

3.5 The Gap between Ideal and Reality: Challenges of Implementing Critical Literacy in Banda Neira

Despite the strong theoretical foundations of multicultural education and critical literacy, the reality on the ground reveals significant gaps. Formal curricula are often oriented toward uniform national standards, while space for exploring local history and collective memory in early grade reading literacy remains very limited (Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 2018). Teachers are trapped by administrative burdens and demands for mechanically measured literacy outcomes (reading ability per minute), resulting in the reflective and critical dimensions of literacy often being marginalized (Freire, 1997; Republika, 2022).

Limited access to local reading materials, teacher training on multicultural pedagogy, and educational infrastructure in Banda Neira exacerbate this gap, leaving the ideal of multicultural education largely a discourse in many classrooms (Kompas, 2022; Republika, 2022). Early-grade reading materials available in schools are generally national textbooks that do not address the Bandanese context, so children learn about life in large cities or villages in Java, rather than about their own lives on a small island with a unique history (Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 2018).

From a Doctor of Education perspective, this gap cannot be read simply as a "technical deficiency," but as a systemic design problem: how curriculum, policies, and teacher training have not fully departed from the local epistemology and historical-sociological needs of Banda children (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1997). Multicultural education demands a repositioning of students as subjects who carry family memories and complex identities, not simply recipients of uniform national content (Freire, 1997; Banks, 2009).

3.6 The Role of Figures and Communities: A Dialogic Learning Model in Early Grade Literacy

The footprints of Hatta, Sjahrir, and Des Alwi in Banda demonstrate that education can move beyond the formal classroom—into a network of afternoon schools, historical discussions, museums, and community literacy practices (Des Alwi, 2006; Tempo, 2023). Des Alwi himself, as a foster child of Hatta and Sjahrir, continued the tradition of liberation education by establishing a museum and encouraging literacy in Bandanese children through stories and books (Des Alwi, 2006). These practices align with Dewey's notion of schools as mini-societies, Vygotsky's notion of social scaffolding, Bandura's notion of modeling, and Freire's notion of liberation education based on dialogue and concrete experience (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986; Freire, 1997).

In today's context, teachers, local communities, and literacy activists in Banda can continue this tradition by integrating local narratives into early grade literacy projects: simple family journal writing, village memory maps, short historical dramas read aloud, and digital content that records the voices of Banda children about their village

(Freire, 1997; Banks, 2009). For a doctoral degree in education, initiatives like these are practical laboratories, where multicultural education theories are tested, negotiated, and enriched by the lived experiences of children and communities (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1997).

4. CONCLUSION

Multicultural education in Banda Neira presents an intersection between the history of colonial violence, identity pluralism, and efforts at social reconstruction through literacy and pedagogical practices. The philosophical foundations of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Freire help us read Banda not simply as a historical object, but as a pedagogical space that demands democratic, dialogical, and liberatory education (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986; Freire, 1997).

The phenomenon of children who memorize the tagline "don't die before you go to Banda Neira" but don't necessarily understand its meaning demonstrates a gap between symbolic pride and critical awareness. The fact that pride in Banda Neira is deeply rooted and inherent in children is a crucial asset that must be cultivated pedagogically. Early grade reading literacy—as the first arena where children learn to "read the world" and "read words"—needs to intentionally make this slogan a source of reflection and dialogue, so that local pride transforms into an ethical commitment to history, diversity, and justice (Freire, 1997; Banks, 2009; Santos, 2022).

From an educational perspective, there are several practical implications and suggestions:

1. The curriculum needs to make greater room for Banda's local history and culture as an integral part of early grade literacy and social studies materials. Early grade reading books should include short texts about Banda, not just generic national texts (Banks, 2009; Sleeter, 2018).
2. Teacher training should incorporate the perspectives of Freire's multicultural educational philosophy and critical pedagogy, so that teachers are prepared to facilitate dialogue on identity, trauma, and local pride through reading literacy activities (Freire, 1997; Santos, 2022).
3. Collaboration between schools, communities, and local figures can enrich learning resources, making museums, historical sites, and local stories into "living textbooks" for Banda children. Early grade reading literacy can be enriched with visits to the Des Alwi Museum, a colonial fort, and simple interviews with community figures (Des Alwi, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).
4. Further research is needed to develop a local Banda context-based early grade reading literacy model that can be replicated in other plural regions of Indonesia (Dewey, 1938; Banks, 2009).

Thus, education in Banda Neira does not stop at slogans, but becomes a long-term movement to form a generation that understands history, is proud of its plural identity, can read texts and the world critically, and is ready to take on a role in weaving a more just and humane Indonesia (Freire, 1997; Banks, 2009; Dewey, 1938).

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