Experiences of ethnic minority students in a culturally diverse school

Pengalaman siswa etnis minoritas di sekolah dengan beragam budaya

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
adjusting process, barriers, ethnic minority students, experiences, multicultural education, culturally-responsive school	Being ethnic minority students in a culturally diverse school is a challenge. This study aims to explore the experiences of students from various ethnic groups as ethnic minority students in a culturally diverse school. These experiences cover both the barriers and the success of those students in adjusting to the culturally diverse school. Five students coming from diverse ethnic groups were recruited as the participants. This study adopted a qualitative design by using a semi-structured interview as the research instrument. The interview data were transcribed and then coded into several themes based on the focus of the research. The results showed that the ethnic minority students might find difficulties adjusting to the school at first. However, they gradually adjusted to the school because of these following factors: teachers' support, students' cohesiveness, students' cooperation, and teachers' equity. The results of this study imply that the ethnic minority students once experienced some challenges in adjusting to the school environment before they were facilitated with more positive schooling experiences related to student-student relationships and student-teacher relationships.

KATA KUNCI	ABSTRAK
proses penyesuaian, hambatan, siswa etnis minoritas, pengalaman, pendidikan multikultural, sekolah yang responsif terhadap budaya,	Menjadi siswa etnis minoritas di sekolah dengan beragam budaya merupakan sebuah tantangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali pengalaman siswa dari berbagai latar belakang etnis sebagai etnis minoritas di sekolah yang beragam budaya. Pengalaman-pengalaman ini meliputi hambatan maupun keberhasilan para siswa tersebut dalam menyesuaikan diri dengan sekolah yang beragam budaya. Lima siswa yang berasal dari kelompok etnis yang berbeda direkrut sebagai responden. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan menggunakan wawancara semi terstruktur sebagai instrumen penelitian. Data hasil wawancara ditranskripsikan kemudian dikategorikan menjadi beberapa tema sesuai dengan fokus penelitian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa etnis minoritas pada awalnya kesulitan menyesuaikan diri dengan lingkungan sekolah. Namun, lambat laun mereka bisa menyesuaikan diri dengan sekolah karena beberapa faktor, yaitu dukungan dari guru, kekompakan siswa, kerjasama siswa, dan perlakuan yang imbang dari guru. Hasil penelitian ini mengimplikasikan bahwa siswa etnis minoritas mengalami beberapa tantangan dalam menyesuaikan diri dengan lingkungan sekolah sebelum mereka difasilitasi dengan pengalaman sekolah yang lebih positif yang berkaitan dengan hubungan antara siswa-siswa dan hubungan siswa-guru.

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Introduction

Nowadays, the term 'education for all' has become widely known, implying that the educational system is expected to be valuable for all citizens. Students are supposed to get an equal educational opportunity no matter what their ethnic backgrounds, race, and religion are; whether they are rich or poor, all of them have to be treated equally. However, many ethnic minority students face difficulties in education (United Nations of Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2010). Many challenges might be encountered by ethnic minority students in the school environment, especially when it is the first time and the first experience for them to adapt to the new environment. Sometimes, there is an incompatibility between the home cultures and the school cultures; therefore, the students might get some barriers to adjust to the school environment. Gardner (2005) asserts some barriers influencing the success of racial and ethnic minority students such as aloneness and isolation, differences, lack of understanding and knowledge about cultural differences, lack of acknowledgment of individuality from teachers, inadequate teachers' support, and discrimination. Furthermore, Clark et al. (2012) examined other factors that serve as barriers to the success of ethnic minority students, such as emotional distress, negative race-related experiences, and lower levels of belongingness and autonomy. Additionally, Wang et al. (2012) highlighted that when students cannot adapt to the new environment fast, they will get some problems in following the learning process, some of which are related to psychological distress.

Barriers of being ethnic minority students were also explored by Grant and Portera (2010) who pinpointed that some of the problems usually occurring among ethnic minority students tend to relate to racial and cultural discrimination in the school. These kinds of problems might have occurred in the Indonesian context in the new order government era. However, nowadays the problems experienced by ethnic minority students seem to relate to personal and psychological aspects. Ethnic minority students possibly have negative emotional well-being characterized by the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in their environment. Therefore, many ethnic minority students experience the feelings of isolation when they want to adapt to a new environment that has different cultural backgrounds and different normal values from the cultural background in their community. The students' sense of wellbeing that relates to school is a key determinant of the students' emotional and cognitive engagement (O'Brien & Blue, 2017).

Students who have negative emotional wellbeing might experience difficulties adjusting to and being parts of the school environment; being parts of the school environment means being parts of a larger group of people because schools consist of a group of people called the stakeholders, such as the students, the teachers, and also the administration staffs. According to Leary and Baumeister (2000), the feeling of belonging to a larger group for individuals is essential to increase the psychological development. Two factors that determine the students' feeling of belonging to a group are a sense of belonging and students' ethnic identity. Both factors are regarded to create better psychological adjustments (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). The sense of belonging to the school environment can be in the form of teacher support and school affiliation (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). According to Goodenow (1993), school belonging can be defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, and included by others in the school environment.

Ethnic identity can also refer to a person's social identity within a cultural or social group. This ethnic identity includes ethnic self-identification or an individual's self-

labelling as a member of an environment, involvement in ethnic group activities, and preferences for the group (Cokley, 2007). Students of ethnic minorities may encounter difficulties adjusting to the new learning environment which in turn can affect their relationship with friends and also with the teachers. For that reason, it is the responsibility of both the students and the teachers to help each other. The students should have the ability to adapt to the new environment, and the teachers should create a comfortable classroom environment for the students.

Studies on ethnic minority students have been widely done in many countries. There are several studies conducted in the United States; for instance, Jones et al. (2002) explored the college students' experiences of ethnic minorities in a higher education institution. The results were divided into six categories of experiences, such as the general campus climate, student involvement, student experience, cross-cultural center, departmental units, and student recommendations. All categories provide the students with voices and experiences. Another study in the US context by Liu et al. (2016) explored the transitional challenges of Chinese students in US higher education. The results revealed some challenges and stress that the Chinese students faced, namely language deficiency, academic differentiation, emotional issues, social exclusion, and financial pressures.

Moreover, another study conducted in Hongkong by Bhowmik and Kennedy (2016) reported a case study of a Nepalese girl living in Hongkong who dropped out of the school. The results showed the reasons for her dropping out of school, such as the history of drop out in the family, peer and community factors, different schooling culture, and racism. Furthermore, in the following year still in the Hongkong context, Bhowmik et al. (2017) portrayed the dropout phenomenon for an ethnic minority student who was a Pakistani student at a secondary school. The results revealed that the factors influencing student drop out are personal life issues and the complex interaction of school contexts. Another study conducted in Ghana by Dei (2004) examined the way Ghanaian schools addressed the students' differences and diversity. The study focused on educators' and students' experiences and understandings of ethnicity and gender as sites of differences and implications for schooling and education. The results showed that educators should ensure that educational excellence is both accessible and equitable for all groups of students; the educators should make sure that the students are fully engaged in their learning experiences.

Most of the previous studies reviewed seem to have focused on exploring issues and challenges that ethnic minority students are facing, such as the issue of dropping out of school. This current study, however, focused on exploring the ethnic minority students' challenges in the new environment and the factors that influence their adjustment process to the school environment. Additionally, there is a disparity of the term ethnic minority between the current study and the previous studies. In western countries, ethnic minority students generally refer to immigrants that come to those countries, and in some Asian countries, like Hongkong, ethnic minority students refer to the non-Chinese students. However, in this current study, ethnic minority students relate to the various ethnic groups in Indonesia from Sabang to Merauke, from the western to the eastern parts of the country. More specifically, the ethnic minority students refer to non-Javanese students because the school is located in the Java island in which the dominant or mainstream culture is Javanese, and more than 50% of the students are Javanese. In other words, the non-Javanese students are included in this study as ethnic minority students. They can be Chinese students as well as students from various ethnic groups in Indonesia like Dayak, Batak, Sundanese, Banjarese, etc. This current study thus aims to explore the experiences of students

from various ethnic backgrounds as the ethnic minority students in a culturally diverse school.

Method

As a qualitative study, the data in the present project was elicited using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were chosen as the research instrument to gain in-depth insight and a deep understanding of students' experiences in their natural setting; interview guides were adopted from previous relevant studies. The interviews were done by face-to-face interactions between the researchers and the participants. It was conducted using the participants' national language (Bahasa Indonesia) to avoid misconceptions. The interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes for each student. During the interviews, the researchers asked the participants about their experiences as the ethnic minority in the school and about the factors that enable them to survive in the school. We stopped asking further questions to the participants whenever we thought the data needed had been saturated.

This study was conducted at a private school in East Java. This private school was selected as the research setting because this school is well known as regularly having students who come from multicultural backgrounds and different islands throughout the country, like Papua, Bali, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Java, and Sumatera. The participants were recruited purposively under the school advice. About 30% of the students are categorized to the ethnic minority students in the school. We were given access to only five students as the research subjects, and these five students fulfilled the criteria for being the subjects of this study as we had informed the school. These five students were considered to be reflecting various ethnic minority students in the school. To ensure anonymity, all names in this study were kept confidential. Those five students met these criteria: the students should be the ethnic minority group in the school; the students should be the ones who live in East Java only for continuing the study; the students should be the ones who once participated in a competition and were thus considered as high achievers. The five participants happened to come from different grades; therefore, it was expected that different grades would reveal different experiences significantly. The five participants come from different ethnic groups; they are Chinese, Sundanese, Dayak, and Papua. The detailed information about the participants was explained in Table 1.

Table 1. The Participants' Background Information

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Ethnicity
1.	YK	16	XII	Papua
2.	MS	17	XII	Chinese
3.	NM	15	X	Dayak
4.	RS	16	XI	Chinese
5.	MT	18	XII	Sundanese

The data gathered from interviewing the five participants were transcribed for analysis. These transcriptions were coded into several themes based on the focus of the research. The researchers adopted analyzing process developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) termed as participants by content matrices. More specifically, the data analysis process underwent these steps. First, each answer was translated into English based on the following rules: excluding the unrelated answers to the

questions, including substantial answers, avoiding any personal interpretations, and staying as close as possible to the actual meanings intended by the participants. Second, each answer was put in a participant by the content matrix to make it more comprehensible. Lastly, each answer was grouped into similar data in a new matrix to find one theme.

Results and Discussion

Based on the participants' responses, the findings of this research were divided into two parts. The first part related to the barriers experienced by the ethnic minority students during their first year in the school, and the second part referred to the factors influencing their adjustment process to make them successful in being parts of the school.

Barriers in Adjusting to the School Environment
Based on the interviews, in the first year of their study, all the participants admitted that they got difficulties adjusting to the school. One of the participants said she was very shy and confused when the first time at the school. This experience is similar to that of the other participants. She narrated:

Excerpt 1

"I come from a small regency in West Kalimantan. When I followed PLS (Perkenalan Lingkungan Sekolah), I was so nervous because it was the first time for me to go out far away from home. I felt like living in a strange place and meeting strange people. At that moment, I was so weird. I was so shy to speak in front of many people at that time, and there were so many things that made me getting confused". (Participant 3)

Another participant from Timika, Papua, also got difficulties adjusting to the school. This participant felt so hard to communicate with his friends. He narrated his experiences in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

"Firstly, I got difficulties to communicate with my friends because we have different ways of communicating. My friends who come from Java tend to speak slowly, however, I usually speak louder and tend to speak fast, then it made our communication was getting hard at that time". (Participant 1)

The different ways of communication skills were also one of the challenges encountered by another respondent. He said as follows.

Excerpt 3

"Due to different dialects that we have, I got a little bit confused to catch the ideas delivered by my friends who come from different islands, especially from ones who come from Papua Island. However, now I can catch what they have said". (Participant 5)

Based on the results of the interview, it can be concluded that the students got difficulties adjusting to the school environment, especially related to relationships with other people. They were shy and confused to speak in front of many people; they also got difficulties communicating with their friends because of the different ways of communication and different dialects. School adjustment is one of the important factors in the educational system. Demirtas-Zorbaz and Ergene (2019) claimed that students who adjust to their school well tend to be more successful and rarely drop out of their schools. In contrast, students who cannot adjust to their school

environment well seem to be more difficult in their academics and also in their social relationships.

Factors Influencing Adjusting Experiences to the School Environment

Based on the responses to the semi-structured interviews, the participants faced some barriers in adjusting to the school environment only during the first grade of their study. They said that once they were in the second grade and the third grade, they could deal with those barriers quite well. They gradually managed to adjust to the school environment because of some factors, namely teachers' support, students' cohesiveness, students 'cooperation, and accepting teachers' equity.

a) Teachers' Support

Receiving teachers' support is an essential thing for the students in the school. Since the students spend much time in the classroom, the teachers as the key figures in the classroom should create a comfortable classroom environment. The participants' answers in the semi-structured interviews indicate that their teachers are very kind. They have the opinion that their teachers welcome the students warmly and show their interests in the individual students' backgrounds. This idea is supported by the participants' answers in the interview. The participants said:

> **Excerpt 4**
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> *"Teachers sometimes asked us to explain and describe unique things in our regency or our province, like the famous tourism objects and also the customs". In English literature subject, we have tasks to promote the culture in our places." (Participant 4)*

Furthermore, the students received much attention from the teachers. Whenever the students got difficulties in the learning process, the teachers would help them. It is in line with the participant's answer as narrated in Excerpt 5.

> **Excerpt 5**
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> *"Whenever we were doing our tasks or exercises, the teachers often go around to see our works and they attempted to check whether we understood the exercises and the tasks or not. For those who seem to get difficulties, then the teachers would re-explain the materials to them until they understand the materials". (Participant 3)*

Teacher support refers to the extent to which the teachers expose their interest to the students (Magen-Nagar & Steinberg, 2017). The teachers show that they are friendly, warm, and helpful to the students. Kaniel (2010) asserted that teachers' support contributes to a positive learning environment. Regarding the diversity of the students, as the main facilitators in the classroom, teachers' roles are very essential in the culturally diverse classroom. Since the teachers and the students come from different cultural backgrounds, there is a need for the teachers to put efforts in understanding their students' culture and to pay much attention to the students' needs. The idea of paying attention to the students is supported by Bragg (2010) and Rudduck and Mclntyre (2007), who stated that students must be heard and considered about their learning and schooling process. In addition, the teachers are expected to be aware of and appreciate the students' cultural diversity (Szelei et al., 2019). Based on the results, the students had been encouraged by the teachers to show their cultural diversity in the classroom. The students are asked to describe something unique in their places of origin, like culturally-typical objects and their home life. The teachers thought by doing such a thing, the interesting and valuable

activities in the classrooms can be created. Besides, there is a big chance for the teachers to know more about the students, and the students can get to know each other as well.

Moreover, Gonzalez et al. (2001) asserted that to show their supports, teachers can create positive relationships with the students by sharing their life experiences outside of school, understanding the students' interests, and listening to the students' opinions. The teachers' positive relationship with the students influences the students' academic performance (Rodriguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Students who experience a positive relationship with their teachers are said to have better social competences and less misbehaving acts (Raider-Roth, 2005). This idea is also similar to the idea proposed by Skinner et al. (2009); Wu et al. (2010) who claimed that teachers' support is one of the factors that can enhance students' sense of academic confidence, sense of mastery learning, and ability to regulate their own learning.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that receiving teachers' support becomes one of the factors that help the students to adjust to the school environment. What the teachers have done was they tried to embrace the cultural diversity in the classroom practice to make the students feel the sense of belonging to the mainstream culture.

b) Students' Cohesiveness

Besides teachers' support, student-student relationships give a greater contribution to the students' adjusting processes in the school and also in the social environment. Because all of the participants once lived at dormitories organized by the clergyman who works at the school, interactions among the students become more often not only in the school environment but also in the dormitories. The more they interact with each other, the easier they understand each other. Furthermore, they also do some activities together to make a positive bond among them. This idea is narrated by some of the participants.

> **Excerpt 6**
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> *"In the dorm, there are many activities that we have done together, like do morning-prayer together every morning and we sometimes go hanging out together with friends. Besides, we sometimes do discussions together. In the discussion process, we usually promote unique things from our regional origin. For instance, as the Papuan people, I told and show my friend about customs, tourism objects, traditional food of Papua to my friends, so do my friends from Sumatera, Kalimantan, Sulawesi. They do the same thing as I did. By doing such a discussion, we will know about cultures and customs from other provinces". (Participant 1)*

> **Excerpt 7**
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> *"Besides praying together, we usually had our breakfast, and dinner together in the dorm. Additionally, in spending the holiday, I and my friends usually go to Bromo Mountain or to some beaches around Malang to spend the time together. Due to many interactions that we have done together and we get used to being together, then our bond becomes better". (Participant 5)*

Students' cohesiveness refers to the lack of conflict within a particular system (Kaniel, 2010). The student cohesiveness is determined by the interpersonal aspect and the feeling of belonging towards the group of people. Besides, the mutual commitment among the students becomes typical characteristics of the student cohesiveness. Students' cohesiveness is essential to make the ethnic minority students easily adjust to the new environment. When the students have better student

cohesiveness, the ethnic minority students will not feel the lack of belonging in the environment. Beightol et al. (2012) pinpointed that the student cohesiveness was an intangible bond and the key factor to create the unity of the team. By having the unity of the team, the students can work and collaborate easily because they have known each other well.

Based on the participants' answers, it can be concluded that the students have positive relationships among them. Since they had experienced living in dormitories, they have many interactions with their friends. These interactions make their bond becomes stronger. Additionally, they also can communicate easily with their friends because they often do group discussions and thus make many interactions. Good student cohesiveness contributes to the adjustment experiences of the ethnic minority students in the school.

c) Students' Cooperation

Besides teachers' support and students' cohesiveness, another factor that contributes to the students' adjustment in a culturally diverse school seems to be students' cooperation. Students' cooperation refers to the extent to which the students cooperate rather than compete with one another. This idea is in line with the participant's answers in the semi-structured interview who narrated as follows.

> **Excerpt 8**
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> *"Since the learning activities are most on group discussion and also project based-learning. We try to cooperate in doing those activities. We realize that in doing a discussion, we have to let every member of the group to speak up. We should not dominate the discussion. Moreover, for doing project based-learning, we are forced to work cooperatively because if there is a little bit of mistake, then all members of the groups will be impacted". (Participant 4)*

Students' cooperation refers to the relationship between the students in the learning process in which each student works together and takes full advantage of the learning abilities (Yoshida et al., 2014). One of the learning strategies that supports cooperation is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning seems to be one of the effective learning approaches which is essential for the school and the community. It is also considered as one of the teaching strategies that can improve self-esteem, cooperation between learners of different cultures, and tolerance, and also it can increase appreciation for different points of view (Joubert et al., 2012). According to Johnson et al. (2014), cooperative learning has five interrelated components, such as positive mutual dependence, personal accountability, useful interaction, social skills, and group process. The purpose of learning process is not only to transfer knowledge but also to educate the students to be able to interact with each other smartly. From the result of the study, it can be concluded that there is a tendency that the teachers implement cooperative learning in the classrooms. This kind of teaching strategy supports cooperation among the students because the students are encouraged to have many interactions among them. Additionally, according to Van Dam-Mieras et al. (2008), cooperative learning is more than a teaching technique; it is a special educational approach that is designed to support the learning development in teams which produces high performance and also provides opportunities for team members to participate in meaningful learning tasks.

Cooperative learning can improve the social skills of the students in which social skills are related to the ability of the students to socialize with other students (Booysen & Grosser, 2008; Lavasani et al., 2011). By having good social skills, there is a tendency that the students will enjoy the learning process. This idea is supported by Cavanagh (2011) who stated that learning through cooperation influences the

enjoyment of the students. By doing some tasks, exercises, or projects cooperatively, there is a tendency that the students will enjoy the process because many interactions among the students occur.

d) Teachers' Equity

The last factor that contributes to the adjusting process of the ethnic minority students in a culturally diverse school is experiencing teachers' equity. Equity means the extent to which the students are treated equally by the teachers. This idea is in line with the participants' answers in the semi-structured interview as narrated in Excerpt 9.

> **Excerpt 9**
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> *"Our teachers are very kind and they never differentiate us, all students are treated equally. One of our teachers often asks one of us to be the leader in the group in rotation. In the first week, student A becomes the leader, then in the following week student B becomes the leader, and so on so forth. By being the leader of the groups, we are trained to be more confident and to be more active in the classroom." (Participant 4)*

Equity refers to teachers' fair treatment to all students and not showing preferences for one student or one group of students (Jonassen, 2009). The students feel that their teachers treat all of them equally. Although most of the teachers are Javanese, they do not show any preferences to the Javanese students only. The teachers have attempted to create comfortable classrooms for all students. Because of that reason, all students feel secure and respected in the classroom. This idea is similar to the results of the previous study by Gardner (2005) who found that the ethnic minority students showed a big desire for the teachers who treat them as an individual with unique needs. They expect that their teachers take an interest in them and realize that they are different from the major ethnic students.

By practicing equity, the teachers try to eliminate the gap among the students. Roodriguez-Izquierdo (2018) stated that teachers need to shape all aspects of school practice by giving the students the same opportunity to reach the learning aims. Although the students have different abilities, which means that some of them are high achievers, some are middle achievers, and others are low achievers, the teachers try to avoid showing their special interest to a specific group of students. The teachers believe that every student is unique, and all of them can learn, for the lack of abilities of the students become their responsibility (Castro, 2010). The teachers need to help the students grow to be a better time to time. It is also in line with the idea by Bondy and Ross (2008) who revealed that the teachers should approach the students well, know the students' cultures and encourage the students to have a high standard in their learning performance.

This equity is also described by the teachers' behaviors that provide opportunities for the students to work cooperatively and to create democratic relations among the students and with the teachers, as also suggested by Chipchase et al. (2012). It is proved by the participants' answers in which they said that the teachers often asked them to work in groups; the teachers assigned one of them to become the leaders in the groups. For the next meeting, another person would be chosen as the leader, so all of the students eventually experienced the chance to be the leaders. Additionally, regarding the ways of communicating, ethnic minority students are different from the mainstream culture; therefore, the teachers tried to understand that the students' language is different and accepted those differences. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the teachers have equity; they always try to treat the

students equally. The teachers avoid treating them unequally; whenever the ethnic minority students had difficulties in the teaching and learning process, the teachers tried hard to help them.

Conclusions

Being ethnic minority students is not easy. There are some barriers experienced by ethnic minority students in their first year of their study. These barriers relate to the students' adjusting process to the school environment, like lack of confidence to interact with others and the difficulties to communicate with other students because of different ways of communication and different dialects. However, those barriers occur only when the students are in the first grade. As time goes by, the students manage to deal with those barriers because of experiencing some factors that relate to a good school environment covering the student-student relationships and student-teacher relationships. Since this study focused on the barriers and the factors influencing the adjusting process of ethnic minority students in the school environment, there is still another chance to conduct further research that focuses on teachers' strategies dealing with ethnic minority students or the social life of ethnic minority students in the society.

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