

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building bridges of intercultural communication: Overcoming barriers and enhancing multicultural education in Indonesia through meaningful contact

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how Papuan students studying in Surabaya – the second largest city in Indonesia – face and overcome various cultural barriers during their adaptation process in Java. The main focus of this study is how they break down stereotypes and prejudices against Javanese society, and how they adapt to local culture through meaningful social contact to be able to live their academic lives smoothly. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of 25 new Papuan students studying at five universities in Surabaya and then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results of the study showed that Papuan students are able to find various effective adaptation strategies in a new environment that is different from their initial expectations. One of the keys to successful adaptation is their ability to identify and utilize meaningful contact zones, namely, social spaces where they can establish positive and in-depth interactions. Some important strategies used to find and build these contact zones include: understanding the character of the person they are talking to, avoiding communication that is too long and indirect, building an open and friendly self-image, being active in the community, and following the social and cultural developments in the city where they live.

Keywords: Papua; Multicultural education; Meaningful contact; Cultural barriers; Stereotypes; Intercultural communication

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1. Introduction

As an archipelagic country, Indonesia is blessed with biodiversity and cultural and ethnic diversity. It is recorded that Indonesia has no <478 ethnic groups and around 742 languages/dialects (Kominfo, 2013). On the one hand, this is a priceless wealth. However, on the other hand, this fact is a challenge for the world of education in Indonesia. Even though so far, Indonesia has been considered capable of uniting ethnic groups within the country because of the unobstructed assimilation of vocabulary, terms, and concepts in both foreign and regional languages (Antara, 2022), the gap between cultures in various fields remain largely unaddressed.

In the education sector, for example, there are still problems related to differences in the quality of education on Java and outside Java (Mustofa *et al.*, 2019), which are not resolved at this time, whereas education is one of the most essential elements for developing human resources (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Until now, Java Island, which is the main and most populous island in Indonesia and is a development concentration area, government center, and economic center (Salsabila, 2022), is usually the top-choice schooling destination where most parents living outside Java to send their children to. This shows that the equalization of the quality of education in Java and outside Java has not been achieved properly.

Further issues in this context often take the shape of prejudice and stereotype issues, which are the main barriers to adaptation (Rahmanda, 2023). In addition, the large number of students from outside Java who come from different social and cultural backgrounds in Javanese society has given rise to a culture shock that makes it difficult for them to adapt to the learning model and social environment in Java (Hagimianti *et al.*, 2018). Even though some educational institutions in the region have embraced multicultural education programs, most of these students often hold prejudice and misconception about other parties when they step into the region, a hindrance to their assimilation into the Javanese society. This will usually influence their learning activities.

Indeed, under many circumstances, the numerous shortcomings of new students in adapting to their surroundings cause acculturative stress, and they have mental difficulties or pressure as a result of the contrasts they encounter (Xia, 2009). This syndrome is an individual reaction to life events based on acculturation experiences, in which the student struggles to adapt to a new environment and culture (Wei *et al.*, 2007). If not resolved effectively, such adaptation struggles will definitely translate into stress and mental health deterioration (Berry *et al.*, 2002).

This research project attempts to investigate how students from Papua Indonesians who study in Surabaya (Indonesia's second-largest city) struggle to overcome numerous cultural hurdles throughout their time in Java. Papuan students were chosen since there are already many Papuan students studying on the Java Island and who have successfully overcome cultural barriers without experiencing acculturative stress. In this study, we investigated how the Papua Indonesian students break down prejudices about the Javanese tribe and how they adjust to a new culture to ensure a smooth schooling process. The researchers hope that this study will serve as an example for people across the world to learn how to adapt to multicultural educational circumstances by suppressing stereotypes and prejudices.

1.1. Prejudice and stereotypes in intercultural communication

In the context of intercultural communication, stereotypes are closely tied to prejudice. Stereotypes are activated by prejudice, and prejudice strengthens stereotypes (Stratton *et al.*, 2006). Prejudice is an antipathetic attitude based on an incorrect and rigid approach to generalizing (Zuma, 2014). Prejudice is defined as a negative attitude aimed toward a person or group in comparison to oneself (Bergh & Brandt, 2023; Katz, 1960). Prejudice is typically manifested as sentiments that diminish the worth of a group (Aschauer, 2020). This feeling is typically expressed by disparaging ethnic minorities, religious minorities, women, individuals with impairments, and others (Abrams *et al.*, 2016).

Meanwhile, stereotypes are judgments about someone based solely on the group into which that person can be classified (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Stereotypes typically emerge spontaneously to reduce difficult issues and are commonly employed to make quick decisions (Desi *et al.*, 2020). Stereotypes are typically the most difficult barrier in an intercultural communication process since they are allegations or prejudices made against other people from different cultural backgrounds (Lubis & Buana, 2020). Aside from media exposure (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021), stereotypes are formed through the influence of people closest to them, such as parents, teachers, and peers (Gundersen *et al.*, 2012). Parents and close family members are the primary sources of information, teaching, and reinforcing stereotyped views in children, which are eventually carried over into adulthood (Brink & Nel, 2015).

Prejudice and stereotypes often serve as underlying factors that shape public perceptions and policy responses toward migrant populations (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2024). These preconceived notions, frequently rooted in fear or misunderstanding, can lead to social exclusion and hinder effective intercultural communication (King & Raghuram, 2013). Addressing such biases requires not only institutional reforms but also opportunities for meaningful contact and dialogue that promote mutual understanding and trust. Instead of being instigated by one party toward the other, prejudice and stereotypes are challenges that must be faced by both migrants and local communities; therefore, it is important to make a joint effort to build effective and inclusive cross-cultural communication (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2018).

1.2. Multicultural education

Multicultural education is a teaching and learning technique that promotes cultural heterogeneity in the classroom by

incorporating democratic values (Bennett, 2001). This is a shared commitment to attaining educational equity, creating curricula that promote understanding of ethnic groups, and eliminating repressive practices (Karacsony *et al.*, 2022). Multicultural education is also sometimes referred to as a reflection of a “caring” and understanding mentality or as the politics of acknowledgment for persons from minority groups (Masruroh *et al.*, 2022).

Multicultural education promotes awareness, appreciation, and appreciation of one’s own culture, as well as respect and curiosity about the ethnic cultures of others (Shonfeld, 2020). This includes evaluating other people’s cultures, not in the sense of agreeing with all features of these cultures, but rather of attempting to understand how a certain culture might represent values for its members (Blum, 2001). Multicultural education is critical for Indonesia as a multi-ethnic country, especially to reduce the possibility of conflict (Suradi, 2018). Multicultural education will assist in the empowerment of varied and heterogeneous communities so that people understand and appreciate one another and create characteristics that are open to differences (Slamet *et al.*, 2021).

2. Data and methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with phenomenological approaches that focus on the study of individual life experiences, the organization of experiences in human consciousness, and the structure of experiences in the world (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). This research was carried out by involving fresh students from Papua in an in-depth study of the issue to look for information or gain a new understanding of the subject. It is envisaged that this research will be able to fully and effectively convey the significance of the subjects’ experiences (Teherani *et al.*, 2015).

As inquiry methods, semi-structured interviews and observation were used to collect data in this study (Abbey, 2020). This study was conducted for a duration of 6 months, from November, 2023 to April, 2024. The informants selected were 25 students from four provinces in Papua who volunteered as informants at several universities in Surabaya. The number of students at various campuses in Surabaya is shown in Table 1. All informants came from outside Java and were new to Surabaya. They were students who had lived in Surabaya for more than a year as students. Each interview with the informants lasted 30 – 60 min. Thematic analysis was used to examine interview data, and interview transcripts were categorized and organized based on appropriate themes and meta-themes (Creswell, 2003). Following that, the researcher evaluated and investigated the theory in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Table 1. Classification of informants

Informants	Province	University in Surabaya
I.1	West Papua	Surabaya State University
I.2	West Papua	Surabaya State University
I.3	South Papua	Surabaya State University
I.4	Papua	Surabaya State University
I.5	South West Papua	Surabaya State University
I.6	West Papua	Airlangga University
I.7	Papua	Airlangga University
I.8	Papua	Airlangga University
I.9	South Papua	Airlangga University
I.10	South West Papua	Airlangga University
I.11	Papua	Ciputra University
I.12	West Papua	Ciputra University
I.13	West Papua	Ciputra University
I.14	Papua	Ciputra University
I.15	South West Papua	Ciputra University
I.16	Papua	Dr. Sutomo University
I.17	Papua	Dr. Sutomo University
I.18	South Papua	Dr. Sutomo University
I.19	West Papua	Dr. Sutomo University
I.20	West Papua	Dr. Sutomo University
I.21	Papua	Petra University
I.22	South West Papua	Petra University
I.23	Papua	Petra University
I.24	West Papua	Petra University
I.25	Papua	Petra University

3. Results

3.1. Wrong stereotypes

In general, the informants were unaware of the fact that Java is made up of various tribes with distinct personalities and cultures. In fact, in addition to the Javanese ethnic group, the island of Java is home to several other ethnic groups, including the Sundanese, Betawi, and Madurese. The Javanese ethnic group itself is made up of people with various habits and customs. Those who live in the inland of Java (Jogyakarta, Surakarta, and surrounding areas, for example) have very soft speaking habits and tend to keep their feelings hidden, whereas those who live in the coastal areas of Java (Surabaya, Semarang, and the North Coast of Java) tend to speak in harsh words, in a loud tone and a straightforward manner (as is).

Many students believe that all Javanese people are the same and are already categorized as having a smooth and welcoming personality. This astonished them when they

first arrived in Surabaya because the people were Javanese with different personalities than the Javanese they had expected. Surabaya's Javanese inhabitants, as a coastal community, tend to speak matter-of-factly and do not utilize polished Javanese language.

When I first met Javanese in Surabaya, I was astonished to see that they shouted and liked to curse. Even though I had previously assumed that all Javanese people were gentle. [I.7]

On the other hand, Javanese people are also often prejudiced against by those from outside of Java. During their initial meetings, they discovered that many Javanese people were kind and there was no evident prejudice against those from outside Java. They discovered that the people of Surabaya were quite nice and respected them as migrant students during their contact with the people of Surabaya. There is no rejection or gestures that degrade or ignore them.

I had previously assumed that because we were physically different from them, they would reject or at the very least shun us. [I.6]

This stereotype occurs because they live in their place of origin and encounter Javanese people from Central Java or inland Java who speak softly. Before conversing, there is usually a barrier in the shape of unpleasant suspicions or prejudices toward other parties in an intercultural communication process (Bergh & Brandt, 2023). They must properly understand Javanese people (who will become interlocutors) in daily interactions.

To overcome the problem of stereotypes, Papuan students took several important reflective and adaptive steps in the process of cultural adjustment. One of the most important was realizing that Java is not a culturally homogeneous region, but rather consists of various ethnic groups with different personalities, languages, and customs, including differences between inland and coastal Javanese communities such as in Surabaya. This understanding emerged along with their direct interaction with local communities which turned out to be inconsistent with previous stereotypes.

Subsequently, they began to open themselves to learning directly through social experiences, observing the straightforward and assertive communication style of the Surabaya community as part of the coastal culture, not as a form of hostility or impoliteness. In addition, they also made adjustments in the way they think and interact, by not directly judging people's attitudes based on limited experience or information received in their home areas (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2018). In addition, they also corrected personal prejudices, such as the assumption

that they would be rejected because of physical differences, by accepting the fact that many Surabaya residents are open and respect their existence as students. This process is an important part of intercultural communication competence, which requires a willingness to deconstruct stereotypes and replace them with more accurate and inclusive understandings (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003).

3.2. Culture shock in the initial phase of intercultural contact

Culture shock is a phenomenon in which people feel confused, nervous, anxious, and uneasy when they visit or live in a new social context that is drastically different from their regular scenario (Rese, 2018). People often experience culture shock and feel uncomfortable, apprehensive, and restless when confronted with a new environment that is vastly different from their previous circumstances (Mundeza, 2021). Papuan students encountered various culture shocks when they initially arrived in Java to study. In truth, they experienced a great deal of culture shock, but in this study, we will focus on the five most common culture shock events reported by our informants (Table 2).

Language is a barrier for students from outside of Java who come to Surabaya. Of course, every Javanese can communicate fluently in Indonesian. However, most of them choose to communicate in Javanese in everyday or social situations (Table 2). Only official meetings or events are held in Indonesian.

... not Indonesian. In Surabaya, everyone speaks Javanese everywhere. It is not just a dialect; it's authentic Javanese. [I.12]

Not only did it reach the point of perplexity, but the inability to speak Javanese also often resulted in a

Table 2. Papuan student's culture shock experiences

No.	Culture shock type	Explanation
1.	Indonesian is not the main language	In Surabaya almost everytime and everywhere people speak Javanese. Indonesian is only used in official forums.
2.	Not all Javanese people are friendly	Surabaya people rarely greet each time they meet new people. They tend to wait to be greeted first.
3.	Individualistic	Surabaya residents tend not to care about other people and focus more on their personal interests.
4.	Not all Javanese dare to get close to Papuans	It turns out that it's not only Papuans who are afraid to start interactions. Surabaya people also have the same fear.
5.	Javanese people do not speak direct	Javanese people start a conversation with small talk first, then get to the heart of the matter.

Source: Researcher elaboration.

withdrawal from social activities. When people feel alone, the easiest option is to withdraw from social connections (Santini *et al.*, 2020). To avoid these negative consequences, practically all our informants immediately began studying Javanese. They even attempted to learn straight from the neighborhood where they dwell so that they can comprehend Javanese terms rapidly and force themselves to socialize in the surroundings using Javanese, but often becoming the laughing stock themselves.

Abbott & Silles (2016) highlight the importance of a shared language in facilitating student mobility. The presence of a common language between the home and destination city can reduce communication barriers and help students adapt to the local culture. However, if students feel alienated because of language differences, this can reinforce negative stereotypes and hinder social integration.

The absence of hospitality in Surabaya is the second type of cultural shock encountered by students from Papua. According to the informants, welcoming strangers is common among Papuans and is considered a form of goodwill. This is contradictory in Surabaya, where greetings do not seem like a commonplace to do and are not usually done.

When I first walked into the boarding house, I envisioned myself in a community; however, this did not occur. We don't even know who each other because we never greet each other. [I.8]

The individualism of the majority of Surabayans is also a culture shock for Papuan students. Most Javanese students in Surabaya are individualistic, which is (of course) a characteristic of urban society as a result of modernization (Rubin & Morrison, 2014). This circumstance, however, surprised students from Papua, who have a strong collective cultural past. The Papuans truly value culture and fraternity (Bayuseno & Windiani, 2020). They were not used to meeting persons who were mutually apathetic or indifferent to one another in their previous environment.

Another culture shock was that apparently, Surabaya people too not dare to approach and communicate with students from Papua. The biggest barriers to their contact with local people are physical differences, accents, and habits. Apart from this (according to informants), local communities' feelings of superiority also create poor interactions that are built with local communities in Surabaya. There is always a popular notion that the Papuan people lag behind other.

The Javanese practice of making small conversations in every interaction is the next culture shock. In every interaction, they always never address the fundamental

point they wish to make directly (Table 2). There is a propensity to loop around to various trivial topics before getting to the main point. This is in stark contrast to the lives of Papuans, who are known for being plain, matter-of-factly, and forthright.

In dealing with culture shock in Surabaya, especially in terms of language and social-cultural differences, Papuan students take several strategic steps to adapt. First, they try to improve their ability to speak good and correct Indonesian, so that they can communicate more easily and be understood by the local community while reducing negative stereotypes. Second, they build a solid internal community as a safe space to support each other and share experiences, which also becomes a place to learn about the local social norms.

The role of the Papuan community really helps us in overcoming culture shock. With them, we can be open and strengthen each other. [I.8]

Third, Papuan students actively participate in campus activities and cross-regional organizations in an effort to open up space for dialogue and bridge differences, especially in dealing with individualistic tendencies and the lack of greeting habits in Surabaya society. Finally, they apply a patient and persuasive approach in interacting, to overcome feelings of superiority that are sometimes felt by the local community, while slowly showing their potential and positive contributions in the campus and social environment.

3.3. Social construction and personal branding

Informants consider the campus in Surabaya appealing because it contains an "open-minded" collection of people who incorporate multicultural ideals into the teaching and learning process. As a result, the campus becomes a haven for people who are open-minded, pleasant, and extremely intelligent. A multicultural campus promotes and enables camaraderie among students, lecturers, and present educational staff (Shonfeld, 2020). This was felt by new Papuan students who engaged with various parties on campus on multiple occasions.

This is a place where everyone is very competent and naturally interesting to work with. They don't care who we are or where we come from. [I.9]

The campus encourages students to establish a common identity based on ostensibly similar personalities to break down social and spatial barriers amongst students from varied cultural and social backgrounds. The multicultural education applied on campus also eliminates the binary social structure that has been emerging, specifically between Javanese and those originating from outside

Java. So far, Java has always been associated with progress, whereas everything else is connected with backwardness (Bhinadi, 2009). Fortunately, this binary construction is not developed and there is no distinction rule for Javanese and non-Javanese students in college. All students are treated equally and have equal rights.

I couldn't locate any university policies or treatment that differed between Javanese and non-Javanese students. Even in terms of money, there is no difference. [I.4]

Apart from that, Papuan students recognize the significance of constructing themselves in the same way as Javanese people do. Of course, not physically, but more as an effort to construct positive personal branding to remove the bad notions that Javanese people have developed regarding Papuans. They have taken several important steps in developing personal branding in Surabaya, beginning with the elimination of stereotypes that have been proven to be false, moving on to not judge people based on their gender, social status, or ethnicity, becoming accustomed to being open-minded, and remaining active in their social environment (Figure 1). This is done to improve their self-image, which has been unfairly judged by other members of society.

We recognize it is merely physical; our soul remains the same. Thus, we strive to create a positive personal brand so that our friends don't hesitate to be friends with us. [I.11]

3.4. Maximization of the meaningful contact zone

The existence of communities on and off campus, according to the informants, made it simpler for them to adjust to their new surroundings (Figure 2). These communities can

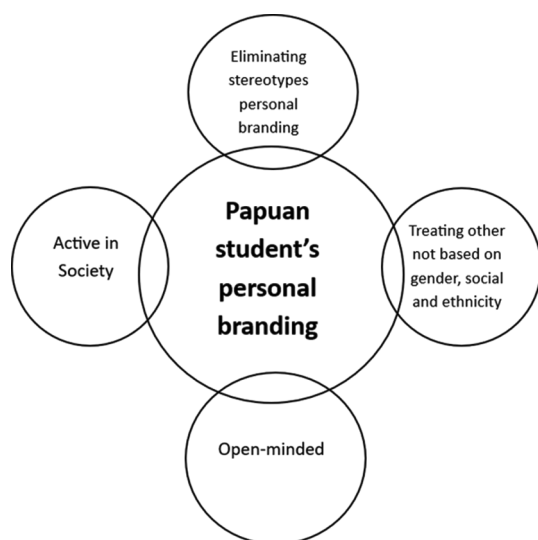


Figure 1. Papuan students' branding
Source: Researcher elaboration.

serve as their contact zone, which is equitable and extremely beneficial throughout their transition to a new university. They engage with the meaningful contact zones that can increase their interactions, and participate in activities that can effectively build attachment and relationships between them if these zones are used correctly (Litt *et al.*, 2020). Internal communities can take the shape of student activity units and student clubs that are developed based on the interests and hobbies of the students. Most of the informants were aware of the significance of these groups' existence because of their potential to unify students from varied origins and provide numerous occasions for them to welcome one another (Abacioglu *et al.*, 2023).

The presence of groups or clubs on campus implies that we have several opportunities to meet and speak with other students. [I.16]

Generally, clubs have no formal hierarchy and are attended by people of all levels, *i.e.*, common people. Regular club meetings, in addition to improving connections among members, indirectly increase social interaction inside the group (Borek & Abraham, 2018), and, at the same time, break down primal ethnic barriers. Despite having distinct ethnic or cultural identities, they are connected and equalized by the club's identity through ties and casual talks with one another. Their identity as a member of the club becomes more visible as they trade knowledge and skills to work collaboratively within the club, but their other identities (ethnic, religious, cultural, social, and economic) are not as visible or veiled (Juang *et al.*, 2021).

Mentoring is also a means of developing meaningful contacts for Papuan students on campus. This normative behavior, introduced in some Indonesian Universities, allows students to overcome their knowledge gaps (Venktaramana *et al.*, 2023). Across mentors, students can learn about campus issues, adjust to the campus environment, and understand the university's principles and culture. Mentors are people who new students can discuss their complaints with and act as a source of reference for

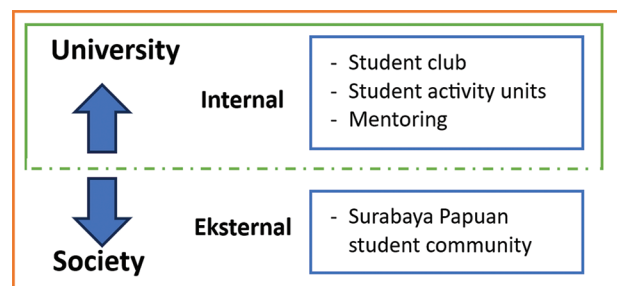


Figure 2. Meaningful contact zone for Papuan students
Source: Researcher elaboration.

how they should act when faced with challenges (Tenorio-Lopes, 2023). They also actively push new students to get more involved in campus social life. Mentors are a true representation of multicultural education since they care about and desire to understand the requirements of new students (Salako, 2026), particularly those from outside Java.

Mentors are extremely valuable to us. We rely heavily on them while we adjust to learning and socializing on campus. [I.15]

Papuan students have made maximum use of the mentoring program provided by the campus as a means to adapt to the new academic and social environment. Across this activity, they not only receive academic guidance but also make mentoring an initial meaningful contact zone – a space for deep and meaningful interaction – that helps them build self-confidence, expand their network of friends, and strengthen their sense of belonging to the campus community.

Outside the university, the Papuan students have a community that caters to their interests and needs while in Surabaya. This community made a significant contribution to Surabaya's adaption process and provides a window for the incoming Papuan students to evaluate the difficulties that are commonly encountered and what the best remedies are to prevent even worse incidents (McNamara *et al.*, 2021). In the community, they shared a lot of information about the innovative efforts made by the Surabaya city government and the city's ecology department in solving various difficulties and improving the quality of life of its people. This is, of course, critical for new Papuan students in Surabaya to create and pursue significant social ties with their new companions.

We frequently confide in one another and share stories about our unique interactions with Java students. Usually, people will comment and supply us with really important information. [I.21]

4. Discussion

According to the testimony of the informants, it is apparent that their greatest strength in developing relationships in multicultural education is decreasing incorrect stereotypes and prejudices. According to Papuan students, they have stereotypes about Javanese people and assume that Javanese people must have false prejudices about themselves. In fact, after seeing it for themselves (by traveling to Surabaya), they discovered that this was incorrect. Stereotypes are the biggest barrier to Papuan students to integrate and swiftly adapt to their new surroundings in Surabaya. This is understandable because stereotypes are

essentially generalizations about other people with different cultural origins (Jussim, 2012) that simplify truly complex judgments.

As a result, incoming students from Papua must control their prejudices effectively so that they do not become counter-productive. The main objective is to prevent the Papuan students from engaging with or entertaining the stereotypes they have of other people, especially if they are not even true. This, of course, applies to both parties: both the Papuan students and the students and the local community. Both parties must break down these negative judgments for the successful formation of connectivity and interaction (Amodio & Cikara, 2021).

Papuan students studying in Java experience identity transformation and increased cross-cultural understanding, but they also face challenges in the form of changing values, communication styles, and social expectations (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). This is in line with the conditions of Papuan students who, when interacting with the culture of urban Javanese society in Surabaya, face pressure to adapt to more straightforward communication norms, a faster pace of life, and social expectations that may feel foreign or even contradict the values of their home culture (Ullah & Chatteraj, 2024).

Some culture shock may be unavoidable. However, culture shock must be followed with an openness to learning and opportunities to connect with locals, communities, and students (Mustafa, 2021). Several university-organized events and communities can be employed to decrease and reduce the shock felt (Pradita, 2016). Papuan students can share their stories and experiences there, as well as learn from seniors or other students about their experiences. This is significant because campus organizations, mentoring programs, and other activities can serve as excellent contact points for new students from Papua.

The established contact zone must be carefully utilized so that it does not simply become an area for chit-chat, but rather a space for meaningful communication. The contact zone, which is a meaningful relationship zone, can be used as a location for student interactions, activities, and shared experiences (Block *et al.*, 2022). They can build attachments and pleasant interactions in it, which will positively and effectively contribute to their respective development (Hooker *et al.*, 2020).

The university appears to be a welcoming environment for Papuan students, thanks to a multicultural education atmosphere. As is well known, multiculturalism education continues to attempt to remove the emerging binary social construction between Java and outside of Java. This amazing binary social construction will fade away

on its own when students from Java and outside of Java form genuine connections. Open interactions and strong linkages will demolish the binary architecture of Java–outside-Java automatically. The distinction between Javanese and non-Javanese students will become obsolete as time passes. This approach can foster an attitude of mutual understanding and respect develop a character that is open to diversity.

Building meaningful connections and engagement becomes crucial and relevant in this situation (Abacioglu *et al.*, 2023). In a university setting that embraces multicultural education, both parties (Papuan students and Javanese students) must nurture more than just interpersonal relations. Casual (reciprocal) conversations within the community and in daily contact that encourage informal knowledge sharing will considerably contribute to the development of meaningful engagement (Zannah & Sumadhinata, 2013). This not only promotes students’ development during their studies, but also helps establish common relationships based on shared identity, which transcends gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, and culture.

Aside from that, comprehending the evolution of Surabaya itself is something that should not be overlooked. A thorough understanding of Surabaya’s numerous public policies can substantially benefit incoming Papuan students’ interactions. The numerous innovations that exist are the common subjects of discussion among students and must be understood or at least comprehended. The

most recent information on Surabaya and its social trends is also presented. This is to avoid confusing the incoming Papuan students regarding the city of Surabaya and the social changes that are taking place.

This study discovered that Papuan students did several things, in general, to establish meaningful interaction, specifically (Figure 3): (i) properly understanding the person you are talking to (if you need to do research first, do not believe the stereotypes that are developing); (ii) avoid long and indirect conversations; start with light, communicative conversations to facilitate effective interactions (by making more use of local language/Javanese); (iii) build good personal branding (building yourself as someone open and easy-going to others); (iv) take advantage of the community (on campus and in the community); and (v) stay up-to-date on the latest happenings in the city you have just moved to.

Based on the contact intergroup theory proposed by Allport (1954), interactions between different groups can reduce prejudice and stereotypes if they occur under certain conditions: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. The results of this research show that their interactions in Surabaya slowly fulfill these elements. When they began to interact with students and the local community through campus activities, mentoring, and community, meaningful contact occurred that helped correct the stereotypes (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2018) that they previously had about Javanese people. This contact became increasingly effective because

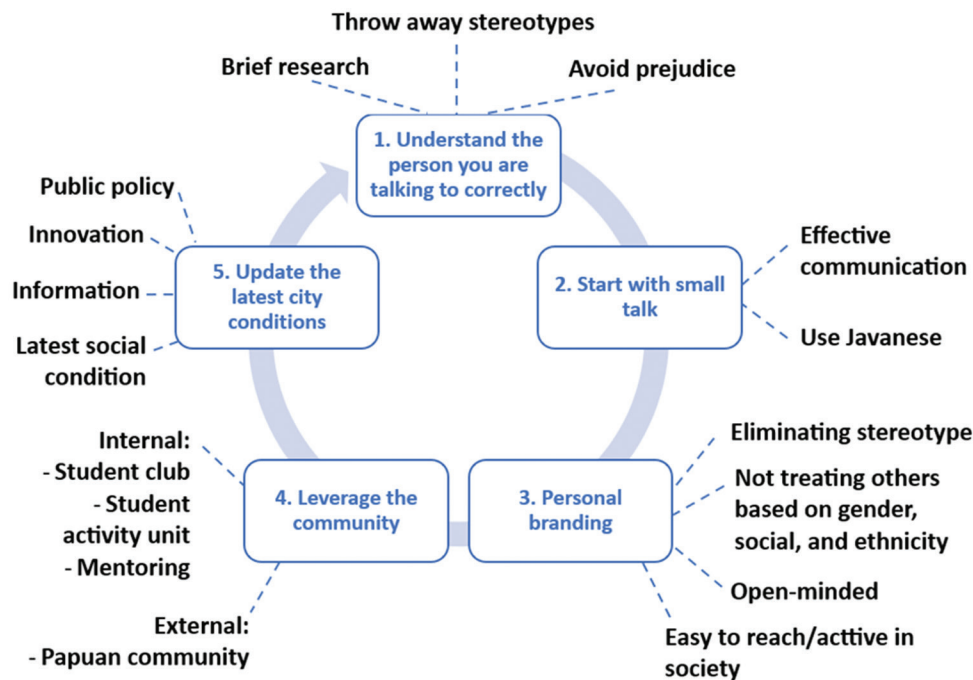


Figure 3. Papuan student’s meaningful contacts
Source: Researcher elaboration

it took place in a relatively equal environment – as fellow students – and was supported by institutional programs that encouraged inclusion, such as orientation programs and organizational activities (King & Raghuram, 2013).

The initial stereotypes held by Papuan students, such as the assumption that Javanese people are always gentle or that local people will reject them because of physical differences, are forms of generalization that simplify cultural complexity. However, direct experience in the context of authentic interactions in Surabaya allowed them to break these assumptions (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2018). This is in line with Allport's main premise that proper contact can break down prejudice (Zuma, 2014). The experience of Papuan students also shows that changes in perception do not only occur one way – local people who may initially have had certain stigmas also begin to open up and build relationships based on similarities with fellow students (Aschauer, 2020). This process reflects the importance of equal status contact and common goals in creating intercultural bridges (Zuma, 2014).

The contact zone formed through campus activities, communities, and informal conversations becomes an effective space for building mutual understanding (Abbott & Silles, 2016). As Papuan students begin to familiarize themselves with local norms, build open personal branding, and actively participate in the social dynamics in Surabaya, they create connections that are not only social but also emotional and cognitive. This is the form of meaningful contact that Allport means: not just a physical meeting, but a meeting that allows empathy and appreciation for differences to grow (Zuma, 2014). In the context of multicultural education, educational institutions play an important role as facilitators of healthy cross-cultural social contact so that they can break the chain of stereotypes and form a more inclusive and harmonious campus society (Shonfeld, 2020).

4.1. Limitations

This study used a phenomenological approach that provides ample space to conduct in-depth observations of the subject's experiences, especially in the context of intercultural communication. However, the main limitation in implementing this study lies in the minimal opportunity to conduct direct observations. Most of the data were obtained through interviews without being supported by continuous situational observations. In fact, a phenomenological approach can enrich our understanding of the meaning formed in everyday interactions, especially in the dynamics of complex intercultural relations. Another limitation is that the research was conducted only in one city – Surabaya. Although Surabaya is one of the destination cities for Papuan students to study, this city

is not the only center of education on the island of Java. Other cities such as Yogyakarta, Malang, and Jakarta also have significant Papuan student populations, with different social and cultural contexts. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized widely to all Papuan students in Indonesia in terms of their intercultural communication experiences on the island of Java. These two limitations affect the depth and breadth of our findings and are important considerations for further research in the future.

4.2. Theoretical and practical implications

This study emphasizes the importance of meaningful intercultural contact as a primary entry point in intercultural communication and multicultural education theory. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of how honest and empathetic interactions can be an effective mechanism to reduce cultural tensions and facilitate positive attitude change. The findings support the concept that intercultural adaptation is not only a passive process of adjustment but also an active process involving identity negotiation and flexible attitude formation. Thus, this study adds a dynamic perspective to the literature on intercultural communication, especially in the context of multicultural education in Indonesia.

Practically, this study provides concrete guidance for Papuan students in facing new environments, such as the city of Surabaya. Meaningful intercultural contact through efforts to build positive personal branding, active participation in the community, and a deep understanding of socio-cultural dynamics is an effective and transformative adaptation strategy. This process allows students to maintain their cultural identity while developing an open and tolerant attitude toward differences.

Furthermore, this research underlines the importance of authentic interactions compared to shallow or small-talk communication, as honest and meaningful interactions not only help reduce cultural barriers but also strengthen social bonds and build more inclusive multicultural spaces. The practical implication of these findings for educational institutions is the need to create an environment that supports the formation of meaningful intercultural contact, involving all elements – students, teachers, and the surrounding community. Across this approach, intercultural learning experiences in Indonesia can develop into a process that not only is academically educational but also serves as a means of character development and continuous improvement of cross-cultural understanding.

5. Conclusion

In the context of multicultural education in Indonesia, intercultural communication plays a crucial role in

supporting the adaptation process of students from different cultural backgrounds, including Papuan students studying in Surabaya. Research shows that the main challenges in cultural transition come not only from differences in values and social norms but also from previously formed stereotypes, both from the newcomers and the local community. Therefore, successful adaptation is not enough to rely on ordinary social interactions, but requires meaningful contact – that is, interactions built on openness, curiosity, and a willingness to understand each other deeply.

For Papuan students, meaningful intercultural contact is an important entry point to reduce cultural tensions and encourage changes in attitudes, both in how they view the local community and in responding to different social expectations. Active efforts such as building positive personal branding, participating in the local community, and understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the city of Surabaya are part of an adaptation strategy that is not only practical but also transformative. This process allows students to maintain their cultural identity while developing flexible attitudes toward the new environment – a characteristic of healthy intercultural adaptation.

Thus, honest and empathetic interactions – rather than shallow small talk – play a vital role in fostering attitudinal change and strengthening social connections. When Papuan students engage in such interactions consistently, they not only overcome cultural barriers but also help create a more inclusive multicultural space. If this approach is fostered by all parties in the educational environment, then the intercultural learning experience in Indonesia can develop into one that is not only academically educational but also character-building and enriching in cross-cultural perspectives.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This work was approved by the Faculty of Communication Science and Media Business Ethics Committee (Approval ID: 006C/UC-COM/ST/II/2024). Informed consent was obtained from participants before their participation.

Consent for publication

Participants consented on the publication of their data.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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