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School Public Relations (PR) Strategy in Building Partnerships with the Multicultural Identity in Maluku Community in Ambon City

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Abstract

Effective school public relations (PR) play a strategic role in strengthening school-community partnerships that support educational quality and institutional sustainability. Although numerous studies have explored school-community collaboration, limited attention has been given to public relations strategies grounded in the multicultural identity and local wisdom of post-conflict communities such as Ambon, Indonesia. This study aims to analyze school public relations strategies for developing effective partnerships within the multicultural context of Ambon City, Maluku Province. A qualitative literature review with a descriptive-analytical approach was employed by examining books, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and educational policy documents related to school public relations, community partnerships, multicultural education, and Maluku local wisdom. The findings reveal six major strategies for strengthening school-community partnerships: (1) involving community and religious leaders as trusted partners, (2) developing school programs based on Maluku cultural values, particularly *pela gandong*, (3) implementing inclusive and sustainable two-way communication, (4) utilizing digital communication and social media strategically, (5) establishing partnerships with local government, religious organizations, and community institutions, and (6) strengthening the role of school committees as institutional bridges. These findings highlight that culturally responsive public relations practices contribute significantly to building trust, promoting social cohesion, and enhancing educational collaboration in multicultural communities. This study offers practical recommendations for school leaders and educational policymakers in designing culturally grounded public relations strategies applicable to multicultural educational settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality of education cannot stand on its own without strong community support. In the context of modern school management, public relations is not merely an administrative function, but a strategic pillar that connects educational institutions with the surrounding social ecosystem (Jannah et al., 2025; Lestari, 2023). Public relations plays a key role in helping schools

build strong partnerships with the community, enabling them to become more adaptive, responsive, and sustainable in achieving national educational goals (Jannah et al., 2025; Lestari, 2023).

Public relations in Ambon City presents its own unique challenges. This is because Ambon City, as the capital of Maluku Province, has unique and complex social characteristics. The people of Ambon are

known for their “pela gandong” kinship system, a traditional bond of brotherhood between communities of different religions that has been deeply rooted in social life for centuries (Bartels, 1977). In addition, the city also has a history of post-conflict reconciliation following the communal unrest of 1999–2002, which continues to shape intergroup relations in various areas, including education (Bräuchler, 2019).

This situation presents a unique challenge for school public relations officers in Ambon. On the one hand, the cultural richness and spirit of cooperation among the people of Maluku constitute invaluable social capital for building partnerships (Arifin et al., 2025; Nurjanah et al., 2025). On the other hand, communal sensitivity and diversity of identities demand a communication approach that is careful, inclusive, and rooted in local wisdom (Arifin et al., 2025; Sri et al., 2020). Without a deep understanding of this context, school public relations programs risk becoming one-way communications that do not address the real needs of the community.

Various studies have shown that active community involvement in school management significantly improves the quality of educational services, reduces dropout rates, and strengthens institutional accountability (Epstein, 2011; Fullan, 2016). Good public relations management is known to effectively address multiculturalism issues. Those responsible for public relations need to consider several factors, such as how to treat, recognize, and respect the existence of each community group or individual. By providing equal treatment and recognition, each community group has equal opportunities regardless of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, or religion (Al Auny & Arrohmata, 2023). Equality of treatment is also accompanied by a sense of sensitivity towards culture and moving the culture of imperial groups to have the same feelings and attitudes as other groups or cultures so that they have similarities with each other (Al Auny & Arrohmata, 2023). However, the implementation of contextual partnership strategies in areas with special socio-cultural

characteristics such as Ambon City still requires more in-depth study. Although previous studies have emphasized the importance of school-community partnerships and public relations in improving educational quality, most have focused on general educational settings. Limited attention has been given to public relations strategies that are specifically grounded in the multicultural identity and local wisdom of post-conflict communities such as Ambon, Maluku. This gap indicates the need for a contextual understanding of how school public relations can strengthen community partnerships in culturally diverse environments.

This study contributes to the existing literature by proposing a culturally responsive school public relations strategy that integrates the local values of *pela gandong* into school-community partnership practices. Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss public relations from a general management perspective, this study highlights the role of local cultural values as strategic resources for strengthening communication, trust, and collaboration between schools and multicultural communities. Based on the background that has been presented, this study aims to: (1) identify relevant and effective school public relations strategies in Ambon City which has diversity and communal sensitivity; (2) analyze socio-cultural factors that influence the effectiveness of school and community partnerships in Maluku; and (3) formulate practical recommendations for school principals and education managers in building partnerships based on local values.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) identify relevant and effective school public relations strategies in Ambon City's multicultural context; (2) analyze the socio-cultural factors influencing school-community partnerships in Maluku; and (3) formulate practical recommendations for school leaders and educational managers in developing culturally responsive partnership strategies.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review using a descriptive-analytical approach. This method was selected because it enables a systematic examination and critical synthesis of existing literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of school public relations strategies in multicultural educational contexts (Marzali, 2017). The data sources in this study include: (1) reference books in the fields of educational management, organizational communication, and educational sociology; (2) national and international scientific journal articles published between 2000 and 2024; (3) relevant national and international seminar proceedings; and (4) national and regional education policy documents.

The reviewed literature consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, and educational policy documents published primarily between 2000 and 2025. The selected sources were required to address at least one of the following topics: school public relations, school-community partnerships, multicultural education, educational communication, or the socio-cultural context of Maluku. Sources unrelated to the research objectives or lacking academic credibility were excluded from the analysis.

Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches of Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Garuda, and the SINTA database using predefined search keywords. These databases were selected because they provide comprehensive coverage of international and Indonesian educational research. The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: "school public relations," "school-community partnership," "educational partnership," "multicultural education," "Maluku education," and "pela gandong." Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied to broaden or refine the search results where appropriate. Data analysis was carried out through three stages: (1) data reduction,

namely selecting and focusing on the literature that is most relevant to the research objectives, (2) data display, namely presenting data in the form of structured descriptive descriptions, and (3) drawing conclusions, namely formulating generalizations based on patterns found in the literature (Miles et al., 2014).

This methodological approach enabled the identification of recurring concepts and strategic patterns that informed the proposed framework for school public relations in multicultural educational settings.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result



Figure 1. Public Relations Strategies for Elementary Schools in Ambon, Maluku

The literature review identified nine interrelated components that characterize effective school public relations strategies in multicultural educational settings. These components were synthesized from the reviewed literature and organized into an integrated framework, as presented in Figure 1.

Strategies for Elementary School Public Relations in a Multicultural Society emphasize the importance of building

strong relationships between schools and diverse communities through effective communication, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. School public relations are strengthened by community partnerships, an understanding of the socio-cultural context of Maluku and Ambon, the integration of local values such as *pela gandong*, and the active involvement of community leaders as trusted intermediaries. These efforts are supported by culture-based school programs, digital communication and social media, leadership from principals as communication leaders, and the role of school committees as institutional bridges between schools and communities.

Together, these strategies foster an inclusive approach that respects diversity, promotes equality, strengthens social cohesion, and enhances public trust, enabling schools to function not only as educational institutions but also as agents of harmony and community development in multicultural societies.

Discussion

The Concept of Public Relations in School Management

School public relations is defined as a planned, systematic, and ongoing communication process between schools and various internal and external stakeholders to build trust, a positive image, and support for educational programs (Cutlip et al., 2013). Within the framework of school-based management (SBM), public relations is one of the core managerial functions that ensures community involvement in the educational decision-making process.

According to Mulyasa, (2014) The function of school public relations encompasses four main dimensions: (1) informative function, namely conveying information about school programs and policies to the public; (2) persuasive function, namely influencing public perceptions and attitudes towards schools; (3) integrative function, namely integrating school interests with community needs; and (4) evaluative

function, namely gathering feedback from the community for improving school programs. In the context of educational decentralization in Indonesia, the role of school public relations is increasingly strategic. Government Regulation Number 17 of 2010 concerning the Management and Implementation of Education mandates active community involvement through school committees and education councils. This positions public relations not as an addition, but as an essential governance mechanism in the Indonesian education system.

School and Community Partnership in Public Relation

Epstein, (2011) developed a comprehensive school-family-community partnership framework, encompassing six types of engagement: parenting, communication, volunteerism, home learning, decision-making, and community collaboration. This framework has been widely adapted in various educational contexts in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, with adjustments to local values.

Sanders, (2016) emphasizes that meaningful partnerships are built on three foundations: trust, relevance, and reciprocity. Schools that merely inform without listening, or that merely invite the community to ceremonial events without substantial involvement in the planning, fail to build genuine partnerships. Authentic partnerships occur when the community feels ownership of the school as part of their community.

School and community partnerships in School Public Relations are partnerships built between schools and the community through mutually beneficial communication and collaboration to support the achievement of educational goals. In this concept, school public relations acts as a liaison that builds positive relationships with parents, community leaders, government agencies, social organizations, and other parties to create participation, trust, and support for school programs. In the Maluku context, this partnership can be strengthened through local values such as

pela gandong which emphasizes brotherhood, mutual cooperation, and tolerance, so that schools function not only as educational institutions, but also as centers for strengthening social cohesion and building student character.

These findings suggest that school public relations should be viewed not merely as an administrative function but as a strategic mechanism for fostering community participation, particularly in multicultural environments where trust and social engagement are essential.

In the context of Ambon, these partnership principles become more meaningful when integrated with local cultural values that encourage collective responsibility and mutual cooperation.

The Socio-Cultural Context of Maluku and Ambon City and Its Impacts on Public Relation

The socio-cultural context of Ambon City, Maluku, refers to how the social and cultural characteristics of the Maluku community, particularly Ambon City, influence public relations practices. Maluku is known for its religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, bound by local wisdom such as pela gandong, which emphasizes the values of brotherhood, solidarity, and cross-community cooperation. The experience of social conflict in 1999–2002 also shaped the community's collective awareness of the importance of dialogue, tolerance, and reconciliation. In the context of public relations, these socio-cultural conditions require organizations, including schools, to develop communication strategies that are sensitive to diversity, build trust through community participation, and prioritize the values of togetherness and social harmony. Therefore, the success of public relations in Maluku is not only determined by the effectiveness of information delivery, but also by its ability to understand and integrate local cultural values in building strong relationships with the community.

The pela gandong system is a traditional Maluku social institution that regulates fraternal relations between villages or clans of different religions

(Cooley, 1987). Pela gandong Muslim and Christian communities in a relationship of mutual assistance and protection, expressed through traditional rituals, mutual cooperation, and the prohibition of marriage between pela members. These values constitute a highly relevant social capital asset for building cross-community partnerships in the educational context.

Following the 1999–2002 conflict, Ambon City underwent a long and gradual process of reconciliation. Educational institutions, including schools, played a crucial role in this process through multicultural education programs, integration of students from different religions, and strengthening the values of tolerance (Hasudungan et al., 2020). This context gives schools in Ambon a broader role dimension than just academic institutions, namely as agents of peace and social cohesion.

Public relations strategies for elementary schools in Maluku can leverage the values of pela gandong through several approaches. First, build partnerships between schools in communities of different faiths. Schools can hold joint activities such as student exchanges, arts and cultural performances, national holiday commemorations, sports competitions, or environmental projects involving students, teachers, and parents from diverse backgrounds. These activities serve as a means of internalizing the values of brotherhood and tolerance from an early age.

Second, school public relations can develop community participation programs based on local wisdom. Traditional figures, religious leaders, and community leaders with a strong understanding of pela gandong can be involved as school partners in character building activities, cultural seminars, and strengthening religious moderation. Their involvement will strengthen the school's social legitimacy while maintaining the sustainability of local values in education.

Third, public relations communication strategies can promote the

pela gandong narrative as a school identity. Publicizing school activities through social media, websites, bulletins, and community forums can showcase practices of tolerance, interfaith cooperation, and successful intercommunity collaboration. This positive narrative helps build the school's image as a safe, inclusive, and peace-supporting learning space.

Fourth, school public relations can initiate cross-community mutual cooperation programs that reflect the spirit of pela. For example, social service activities, public facility repairs, environmental reforestation, or humanitarian assistance involving residents from villages or communities with pela ties. Such programs strengthen social networks and increase public trust in schools.

From a public relations theory perspective, utilizing pela gandong values aligns with the community relations approach, which aims to build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and communities. Schools not only receive support from the community but also contribute to maintaining social cohesion and the sustainability of local culture. Therefore, a public relations strategy for elementary schools in Maluku based on pela gandong values can be an effective educational communication model for strengthening community participation, building a positive school image, and instilling values of tolerance and peace in students.

Conceptually, this relationship can be formulated as pela gandong functioning as socio-cultural capital, while school public relations serves as an institutional mechanism that transforms this social capital into communication practices, partnerships, and educational collaboration that support the creation of inclusive schools and harmonious post-conflict communities.

This finding indicates that socio-cultural understanding is not only contextual knowledge but also a strategic resource for developing effective educational communication.

Maluku's Local Values-Based Communication Strategy for School Public Relations

The literature review shows that the most effective public relations strategies in Ambon are those based on a deep understanding of local cultural values. The principle of pela gandong, for example, can serve as a conceptual framework for designing inclusive partnership programs. Schools that symbolically position themselves as part of the community's "extended family," rather than as separate, foreign institutions, gain greater public trust (Rosely, 2026).

Communication based on personal relationships (relational communication) has proven to be more effective than formal and bureaucratic communication in the context of Maluku society. Purwani & Rosidah, (2026) shows that home visits by principals or teachers as well as informal conversations in various community forums create much stronger emotional bonds than official circulars or formal meetings.

The use of the Ambonese regional language (Ambonese Malay) in communication with the community has also been shown to foster closeness and trust. Although Indonesian is the official language, the use of expressions or greetings in the local language demonstrates the school's respect for the community's cultural identity and is an important signal that fosters a sense of belonging (Kumbangsila, 2018).

Therefore, integrating local wisdom into public relations practices enables schools to communicate in ways that are culturally relevant and socially accepted by the community.

Involvement of Community Leaders as a Bridge of Trust

The social structure of Ambonese society places certain figures such as soa chiefs (heads of traditional clans), priests, pastors and mosque imams in highly respected positions of moral authority. Wibowo & Yani, (2016) shows that school programs that receive support and active involvement from these figures receive

much higher community participation than programs run independently by schools.

The involvement of community leaders is not merely a symbolic strategy. They can serve as effective communication bridges, translating school programs into language and values understood by the community, and resolving potential conflicts or misunderstandings before they escalate. This approach aligns with the boundary spanning concept proposed by Aldrich & Herker, (1977), where certain individuals serve as liaisons between the organization and its environment.

School Program Based on Culture and Local Wisdom

The Culture-Based School Program and the integration of Maluku culture into school programs are public relations strategies that also have a pedagogical dimension. Activities such as the Maluku arts and culture festival, the Cakalele dance competition, the inter-student Pela Gandong parade, and the traditional culinary exhibition not only strengthen students' cultural identity but also become attractions that invite wider family and community involvement (Riyanti & Novitasari, 2021; Wakano, 2019).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's School Mover and Independent Curriculum Program provides schools with greater opportunity to develop local content within their curricula. Schools in Ambon can capitalize on this opportunity to strengthen their Maluku identity in daily learning, which in turn enhances their relevance to the surrounding community.

Digital Communication and Social Media for Public Relations

Smartphone and social media penetration in Ambon City has shown significant growth in the last decade. Badan Pusat Statistik Maluku, (2023) noted that over 70% of households in Ambon City have regular internet access. This situation opens up opportunities for schools to utilize digital platforms as effective and efficient public relations communication channels.

WhatsApp Groups have become the primary communication tool between schools and parents in Ambon, replacing the previously dominant paper circulars. Their advantages lie in their speed, accessibility, and ability to encourage real-time, two-way responses. However, Rohadi et al., 2021; Sirait & Gosal, (2025) reminding that poor WhatsApp group management such as too much irrelevant information or lack of moderation can actually reduce parental trust and involvement.

Instagram and Facebook have also proven effective in building a positive school image through visual content showcasing student achievements, innovative learning activities, and moments of community collaboration. Consistency of content, visual quality, and a warm yet professional tone are key to a successful school social media strategy (Hattu & Ngabalin, 2023).

Digital platforms should therefore complement rather than replace face-to-face communication, particularly in communities where interpersonal relationships remain highly valued.

The Role of the Principal as a Public Relations Communication Leader

The principal's leadership has a very large influence on the effectiveness of school public relations. Norawati et al., (2024) conducted research in several secondary schools in Ambon City, found that principals who were actively present in community activities not only within the school were able to build social capital which significantly increased community participation in school programs.

An effective principal as a communication leader in the Ambon context needs to have the following abilities: (1) to understand local social and cultural dynamics; (2) to communicate authentically and empathetically across groups; (3) to manage conflict through a deliberative approach and local wisdom; and (4) to build a shared vision that connects school goals with community aspirations. These competencies align with the concept of servant leadership, which places service to

the community at the heart of leadership (Greenleaf, 2002).

Consequently, the principal serves not only as an educational leader but also as the primary communication ambassador representing the school within the wider community.

School Committee as an Institutional Bridge for Public Relations

The school committee, as mandated by Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 75 of 2016, is a participatory institution that connects schools with parents and the community. In the Ambon context, the effectiveness of the school committee depends heavily on the representativeness of its members, who reflect the diversity of the community (religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status) within the school's area.

Optimally functioning school committees in Ambon not only focus on fundraising, but are also active in program planning, policy advocacy, and mediation between schools and the wider community. Mar'ati, (2022) research showed that schools with active and representative committees had higher levels of parent satisfaction and lower communal conflict.

This finding reinforces the importance of representative school committees in ensuring that community voices are incorporated into school decision-making processes.

An Inclusive Approach in a Pluralistic Society for Public Relations

The religious and ethnic plurality of Ambon City demands a public relations approach that is explicitly inclusive, not only non-discriminatory, but actively embraces diversity as a strength. Partnership programs designed to engage interfaith communities equally, including both Muslims and Christians, send a strong message about the school's commitment to unity.

Best practices found in the literature include: organizing joint activities at different religious moments (such as sharing

Ramadan takjil or sharing Christmas joy across communities), exchange programs between students from schools with different community bases, and the establishment of inter-community dialogue forums facilitated by the school (Farid, 2016; Taufik & Maimunah, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates that effective school public relations strategies for building community partnerships in Ambon City should be grounded in the socio-cultural values and local wisdom of Maluku. A generic and uniform approach will not be successful in the context of a society rich in tradition, history, and complex social dynamics. The six main recommended strategies are: (1) active involvement of community leaders as bridges of trust; (2) development of programs based on Maluku's culture and local wisdom; (3) authentic, inclusive, and sustainable two-way communication; (4) strategic use of social media with relevant and high-quality content; (5) synergistic partnerships with various local institutions and stakeholders; and (6) optimizing the role of the school committee as a representative of the community. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing that local cultural values, particularly *pela gandong*, should be regarded as strategic communication assets rather than merely cultural traditions. Integrating these values into school public relations practices enables schools to establish stronger trust, enhance community participation, and foster sustainable partnerships in multicultural educational settings.

The empathetic, adaptive, and community-oriented leadership of the principal is a determining factor in implementing these strategies. Successful schools in Ambon are not the most technologically advanced or the largest in terms of infrastructure, but rather those that are most trusted by the community as part of their own identity. Practically, the proposed strategies may serve as a

reference for school principals, public relations officers, school committees, and educational policymakers in designing culturally responsive communication programs that strengthen school-community collaboration, particularly in multicultural regions. Future research is encouraged to validate the proposed framework through empirical case studies or mixed-methods research involving schools in different multicultural regions of Indonesia. Comparative studies across provinces may also provide broader insights into culturally responsive school public relations practices.

Ultimately, inclusive public relations practices strengthen social cohesion while supporting schools in achieving educational goals within culturally diverse communities.

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