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Integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching into Project-Based Learning: Strategies for Enhancing Creativity and Cultural Awareness Among Vocational Students

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ABSTRAK

Dalam lanskap pendidikan vokasi, transmisi nilai-nilai sejarah/budaya sering kali terpinggirkan oleh prioritas kompetensi teknis, yang menyebabkan terputusnya hubungan antara siswa dan identitas budaya mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis integrasi Culturally Responsive Teaching dalam Project-Based Learning memperkuat kreativitas dan kesadaran budaya siswa vokasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) yang melibatkan 40 siswa melalui dua siklus reflektif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dokumentasi, penilaian proyek, dan lembar refleksi siswa. Data dianalisis secara deskriptif kualitatif melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan yang dipadukan dengan analisis komparatif hasil antarsiklus. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan pada Siklus 1, yang memanfaatkan platform desain digital, berhasil menumbuhkan keterlibatan teknis namun gagal menangkap kedalaman filosofis warisan budaya. Konsekuensinya, Siklus 2 menggeser lokus pembelajaran ke strategi pengalaman imersif, menghubungkan siswa secara langsung dengan para pengrajin untuk memfasilitasi transmisi budaya yang autentik. Temuan menunjukkan transformasi mendalam di mana siswa berevolusi dari sekadar pereproduksi motif digital yang pasif menjadi agen budaya aktif yang mampu mereinterpretasi filosofi tradisional menjadi produk fisik yang inovatif. Disimpulkan sinergi PjBL dan CRT berfungsi sebagai strategi ampuh untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara tradisi dan modernitas, secara efektif memperkuat kreativitas sekaligus resiliensi budaya pada generasi vokasi. Implikasi penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa integrasi CRT dalam PjBL dapat mengembangkan kompetensi teknis, kreativitas, dan literasi budaya.

ABSTRACT

In vocational education, the transmission of historical and cultural values is often sidelined by priorities focused on technical competence, creating a disconnect between students and their cultural identities. This study examines how integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) into Project-Based Learning (PjBL) enhances the creativity and cultural awareness of vocational students. The study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) involving 40 students across two reflective cycles. Data were collected through observation, interviews, documentation, project assessments, and student reflection sheets. Analysis used a descriptive-qualitative approach which comprised data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing complemented by a comparative analysis of results between cycles. The findings indicate that Cycle 1, which utilized digital design platforms, successfully fostered technical engagement but failed to capture the philosophical depth of the cultural heritage. Consequently, Cycle 2 shifted the learning focus toward immersive experiential strategies, connecting students directly with artisans to facilitate authentic cultural transmission. The findings reveal a profound transformation: students evolved from passive reproducers of digital motifs into active cultural agents capable of reinterpreting traditional philosophies into innovative physical products. The study concludes that the synergy between PjBL and CRT is a powerful strategy for bridging tradition and modernity, strengthening both creativity and cultural resilience among vocational students. The implications of this study indicate that integrating CRT into PjBL can develop technical competence, creativity, and cultural literacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century global educational landscape faces a fundamental paradox: on one hand, there is a demand for the standardization of technical competencies to meet the needs of the neoliberal labor market; on the other hand, there is an urgent need to preserve local identities as a form of cultural resistance (Muhtarom & Firmansyah, 2022; Sari et al., 2022). Amid the tide of global development, strengthening local geography and specific identities has become crucial to prevent cultural homogenization (Cyntya et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2022). In the context of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), this challenge is even more pronounced because the curriculum tends to be dominated by the mastery of hard skills, which often marginalizes values education and history. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, history education serves as a vital moral defense in safeguarding students' character from technological disruption and identity crises (Maulana & Mediatati, 2023; Pajriah & Aan Suryana, 2023). Without appropriate pedagogical intervention, vocational students risk becoming skilled workers who are alienated from the cultural roots of their own nation (Pajriah et al., 2020; Sari et al., 2022).

Specifically, Ciamis Regency possesses a wealth of intangible cultural heritage that has the potential to serve as a source of contextual learning, one of which is Ciamis Batik (Novia et al., 2023; Pajriah & Suryana, 2021). Ciamis batik is not merely an artistic artifact, but a visual manifestation of the philosophical values of the Sundanese people, who are adaptable yet steadfast in upholding their principles (Muslimah & Falah, 2022; Sari et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the integration of these local wisdom values into history instruction at vocational high schools still faces methodological obstacles (Pajriah et al., 2020; Muhtarom & Firmansyah, 2022). Based on a preliminary study at SMKN 2 Ciamis, history instruction remains stuck in a conventional and boring approach, thus failing to stimulate students' cognitive and emotional engagement. This phenomenon aligns with findings indicating that students' negative perceptions of history learning are often caused by teaching methods that are not relevant to the characteristics and learning styles of the dynamic Generation Z (Febriani & Widiadi, 2024; Naredi et al., 2023).

To address the gap between the demands of 21st-century competencies and the reality of learning, a transformation of the learning model from passive to constructivist is necessary. The 21st Century Skills framework identifies creativity and innovation as the top competencies that students must master (Busnawir et al., 2025; Firdausy et al., 2024). In this regard, the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model has been empirically proven to be effective in facilitating the development of these skills. The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) can significantly enhance creative thinking skills because it requires students to solve complex problems through the process of creating tangible products (Busnawir et al., 2025; Khafah et al., 2023). Project-Based Learning provides students with the autonomy to explore various ideas, which is one of the key prerequisites for fostering and developing creativity (Asidiqi, 2024; Khafah et al., 2023).

However, implementing PjBL alone without cultural content risks producing outcomes that lack meaning (Firdausy et al., 2024; Pajriah & Suryana, 2021). Therefore, this study offers a novel approach by integrating the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach into the PjBL framework. CRT does not merely incorporate cultural content but uses students' cultural identities as the primary reference in the learning process. The Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach has been proven effective in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in history education. More specifically, a project-based learning model rooted in local culture (local culture-based PjBL) has a significant impact on enhancing students' cultural awareness (Pajriah & Aan Suryana, 2023; Parmiti et al., 2021). Through this synergy, history learning not only reconstructs the past but also revitalizes it to make it relevant to the present (Nababan et al., 2025; Pajriah & Suryana, 2021; Yuniar et al., 2022).

Although various studies have demonstrated that Project-Based Learning is effective in enhancing students' creativity (Asidiqi, 2024; Khafah et al., 2023) and that Culturally Responsive Teaching can strengthen critical thinking skills and cultural awareness (Marlin et al., 2024; Parmiti et al., 2021). Studies integrating these two approaches into history instruction within the context of vocational education remain very limited. Furthermore, most previous research has focused primarily on improving learning outcomes or thinking skills without simultaneously fostering creativity and cultural awareness through the utilization of local wisdom (Pajriah & Aan Suryana, 2023; Marlin et al., 2024). Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching into the syntax of Project-Based Learning based on Ciamis Batik as a medium for teaching history to simultaneously develop the creativity and cultural awareness of vocational students. Consequently, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to the development of a history pedagogy that is more contextual, responsive to local culture, and relevant to 21st-century competency requirements (Busnawir et al., 2025; Muhtarom & Firmansyah, 2022).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching into a Project-Based Learning model supported by Ciamis Batik media. The primary

focus of the study is to measure improvements in students' creativity and cultural awareness at SMKN 2 Ciamis. This research is important to address a gap in the literature regarding culturally responsive history pedagogy models in vocational schools. Practically, the results of this study are expected to serve as best practices for the development of an independent curriculum that emphasizes the Pancasila learner profile. Theoretically, this study reinforces the argument that the preservation of local traditions and the modernization of vocational education are not mutually exclusive but can reinforce one another (Janah et al., 2024; Novia et al., 2023).

2. METHOD

This study employs a participatory Classroom Action Research design based on the spiral model (Maharotunnisa et al., 2025; Marlin et al., 2024). This model was chosen because its recursive structure, which includes planning, action, observation, and reflection, enables continuous pedagogical improvement in the natural context of the classroom. The research was conducted collaboratively at SMKN 2 Ciamis during the Odd Semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, with 40 tenth-grade TKJ students selected through purposive sampling. In accordance with the principle of collaboration in action research, the history teacher acted as the "action taker" to minimize distortions in the learning process, while the researcher served as a full "observer" to maintain objectivity in data collection (Marufah et al., 2025; Noviarini et al., 2024).

Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation. Data collection instruments include an observation sheet to monitor the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) integrated with Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), a product assessment rubric that adapts Torrance's creativity indicators, namely fluency, flexibility, and novelty, and an attitude scale questionnaire to measure students' cultural awareness (Rahmawati, 2025; Saputro, 2025). All instruments underwent content validity testing through expert judgment by two validators with expertise in history education and learning evaluation. Feedback from the validators served as the basis for revising and refining the instruments until they were deemed suitable for use in the study.

Data analysis employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, in which qualitative data served as the primary data supported by quantitative data (Kusuma et al., 2025; Raihan et al., 2025). Qualitative data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of three simultaneously occurring processes: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. Meanwhile, quantitative data from test results and rubrics were analyzed using descriptive-comparative methods to identify trends in mean score increases across cycles. The study was deemed successful if 75% of students achieved learning mastery and demonstrated a consistent positive trend in the variables of creativity and cultural awareness.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study was conducted in two action cycles to investigate the effectiveness of integrating Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) into the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model on students' creativity and cultural awareness. In general, the field data showed a significant upward trend from the pre-cycle condition to the end of Cycle 2, in terms of cognitive, psychomotor (products), and affective (cultural awareness) aspects. The improvement in students' creativity was one of the main aspects analyzed in this study, with the assessment focused on the batik products created by students during the learning process. This assessment covers the four main indicators of creative thinking according to Torrance: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. A summary of the development of students' creativity scores is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Average Scores for Creativity Indicators

Creativity Indicators	(Baseline)	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Final Category
Fluency	52	78	90	Very Good
Flexibility	48	70	85	Good
Originality	40	65	88	Very Good
Elaboration	45	68	86	Good
Total Average	46.25	70.25	87.25	Very Good

Based on Table 1, there was a significant increase in scores in Cycle 1, particularly in the Fluency indicator (score of 78). This was due to the use of digital media (Canva), which enabled students to quickly produce various design alternatives. However, in Cycle 1, the Originality indicator remained in the “fair” category (score of 65). Analysis of the products shows that students’ designs at this stage tended to merely duplicate motifs found on the internet without significant modification. A qualitative transformation occurred in Cycle 2. After students interacted directly with artisans at the Rukun Batik Cooperative (an immersive CRT intervention), the Originality score rose sharply to 88. These findings indicate that the direct experience of understanding the philosophy of batik inspired students not merely to imitate but to innovate (for example, by combining Galuh Pakuan motifs with modern geometric ornaments) without compromising traditional norms. This demonstrates that original creativity stems from a deep understanding of culture.

In addition to creativity, the primary focus of this study is cultural awareness. Data were collected through an attitude scale questionnaire and participant observation, which measured four levels of cultural awareness: recognition, understanding, appreciation, and internalization/action. The frequency distribution of students’ levels of cultural awareness is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Students’ Levels of Cultural Awareness

Category (Score Interval)	Pre-Cycle	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Percentage
Very High (86–100)	0	5	32	80%
High (71–85)	4	15	8	20%
Moderate (56–70)	12	16	0	0%
Low (<55)	24	4	0	0%
Total Number of Students	40	40	40	100%
Class Average	48 (Low)	65 (Moderate)	92 (Very High)	

The data in Table 2 illustrates a radical shift in students’ cultural awareness profiles. In the pre-cycle, the majority of students (60%) were in the low category, reflecting a lack of concern for local heritage. In Cycle 1, although the average score increased to 65, the majority of students remained stuck at the “knowing” (cognitive) level but had not yet reached the “feeling” (affective) level. The Cycle 1 evaluation found that the digital design was often devoid of meaning; students knew the names of the motifs but did not understand the philosophy of “simplicity” behind them. The intervention in Cycle 2 successfully addressed this stagnation. The class’s average score jumped to 92 (Very High), with 80% of students in the top category. Qualitative findings during the reflection process showed that students began using cultural terminology (such as ciung wanara, kumeli, lereng) in their daily discussions with a sense of pride. This improvement confirms that the immersive experiential learning strategy effectively shifted students’ perceptions from viewing batik merely as an ancient fabric to a source of pride in their identity. A trend graph showing the increase in classical learning mastery is presented in Figure 1.

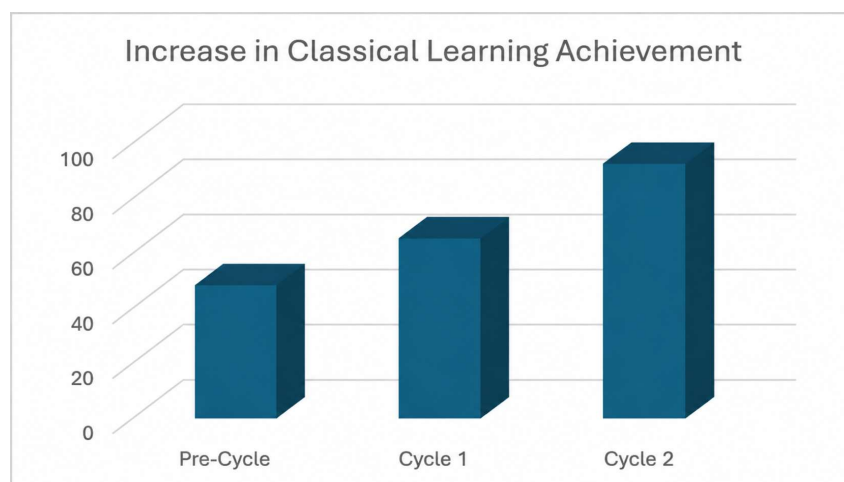


Figure 1. Trend Graph of the Increase in Classical Learning Achievement

Overall, the research results show that the integration of PjBL and CRT produces simultaneous effects. The improvement in cultural understanding (CRT) provides the “raw material” for inspiration in the

creative process (PjBL), so that the products created at the end of the study possess far higher aesthetic quality and philosophical value compared to the initial products.

Discussion

This study successfully demonstrated that the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) within the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) framework is an effective pedagogical strategy for revitalizing history learning in vocational schools. Key findings indicate a positive correlation between the depth of students' interaction with cultural sources (Ciamis Batik) and improvements in the quality of their creativity and cultural awareness. Interpretation of the cycle data reveals an interesting phenomenon regarding the evolution of student creativity. In Cycle 1, the use of digital technology (Canva) proved capable of improving the "fluency" indicator but failed to boost originality. This confirms the critique that technology without a philosophical foundation only produces "replication," not "innovation." These findings align with the argument that creativity in Project-Based Learning (PjBL) requires a strong understanding of content as the raw material for developing ideas (Asidiqi, 2024; Khafah et al., 2023).

The surge in originality in Cycle 2, in which students were able to adapt traditional motifs into contemporary designs, demonstrates that a high level of creativity stems from a deep understanding of culture (Khafah et al., 2023; Parmiti et al., 2021). When students interact directly with artisans at the Rukun Batik Cooperative, they internalize philosophical values, such as the simplicity and resilience of the people of Ciamis, which are then expressed in their batik works. This reinforces Torrance's theory of creativity, in which the aspect of elaboration (detail) emerges when a person has in-depth knowledge of the object being created (Asidiqi, 2024; Busnawir et al., 2025). Thus, this study expands upon previous findings by adding the premise that, in the context of history education, creativity is not merely a technical skill in design but rather the ability to reinterpret the past within the context of the present (Khafah et al., 2023; Pajriah & Suryana, 2021).

The significance of this study also lies in its success in shifting students' cultural awareness from the cognitive to the affective level. The dramatic increase in cultural awareness scores at the end of Cycle 2 demonstrates that the immersive (experiential learning) CRT approach is far more effective than expository or purely digital approaches. These findings support studies concluding that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) rooted in local culture has a significant impact on students' cultural awareness (Pajriah & Suryana, 2021; Parmiti et al., 2021). In the context of Ciamis Batik, students no longer view batik as an ancient artifact but as part of their personal identity (Nababan et al., 2025; Muhtarom & Firmansyah, 2022). The process of applying canting, which requires patience, teaches the value of resilience, a trait that is essential in the 21st century (Wahyuriani et al., 2024). This aligns with the view that history education should serve as a vehicle for transmitting character values. Through this model, history learning is no longer merely focused on memorizing dates and events but becomes a meaningful experience that helps shape students' identities (Fauzi et al., 2024; Hikmah & Haliq, 2026; Pajriah & Aan Suryana, 2023).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that integrating a culturally responsive approach into project-based learning can enhance students' engagement, creativity, and understanding of local culture through contextual and authentic learning experiences (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Murtono & Wahyudi, 2024). Previous research has also confirmed that local wisdom as a learning resource enables students to understand culture while applying it in creative works (Sari et al., 2022; Yuniar et al., 2022). In line with these findings, the strength of this study lies in the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which links the development of creativity with the strengthening of cultural awareness among vocational students through the context of Ciamis Batik. Furthermore, the use of authentic experiences through direct interaction with artisans encourages students not merely to digitally reproduce motifs but to understand the philosophy and cultural values of Ciamis Batik before reinterpreting them into innovative products (Hikmah & Haliq, 2026; Saputro, 2025).

Academically, this study contributes to the literature on vocational education by offering a model that synthesizes constructivism (PjBL) and critical cultural theory (CRT). This study challenges the assumption that vocational education (SMK) must be completely separate from the humanities. Instead, this study demonstrates that the integration of local wisdom actually enriches students' vocational competencies (design/crafts) with aesthetic and philosophical added value (Parmiti et al., 2021). From a practical and policy perspective, these findings have strategic implications for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly within the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) (Mu'arifah & Mustikawati, 2026; Pajriah et al., 2023). The learning model developed in this study can be adopted as a best practice for vocational schools to: (1) Develop contextual and project-based history teaching modules (Nasution et al., 2024; Naredi et al., 2023) and (2) Build strategic partnerships with local creative industries (such as batik centers) not only as sites for technical internships but also as cultural laboratories. Furthermore, on a macro scale, this model serves as a concrete response to the challenges of

globalization, which demand the strengthening of local identity and culture to prevent cultural homogenization (Sari et al., 2022). By strengthening local identity through education, vocational schools play an active role in creating a geography of resistance against cultural homogenization, producing graduates who are not only globally competent but also deeply rooted in their local communities (Muhtarom & Firmansyah, 2022; Nababan et al., 2025).

Although this study indicates that the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching into Project-Based Learning can enhance the creativity and cultural awareness of vocational students, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the research findings (Khafah et al., 2023; Pajriah & Suryana, 2021; Parmiti et al., 2021). The study involved only one class at a single vocational school and was conducted over two action cycles; therefore, the findings cannot yet be broadly generalized or used to describe the long-term impact of implementing this learning model. Furthermore, the use of Ciamis Batik as the learning context limits the applicability of the findings to other forms of local wisdom (Febriani & Widiadi, 2024; Naredi et al., 2023). Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a more diverse group of participants, extend the duration of the study, and test the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Project-Based Learning in various local cultural contexts and different subject areas to strengthen the validity and generalizability of the research findings.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the integration of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model with the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach has proven effective in revitalizing history education in vocational schools, transforming it from a mere transfer of factual knowledge into a dynamic vehicle for character building and creativity. The essence of the findings indicates that a phased pedagogical intervention, moving from digital exploration in Cycle 1 to immersive experiential learning at a batik center in Cycle 2, successfully bridged the gap between students' technical competencies and their cultural identity. Significant improvements in indicators of product originality and the internalization of philosophical values demonstrate that the creativity of vocational students flourishes optimally when rooted in a strong understanding of culture. Thus, this model not only produces aesthetically pleasing batik products but also transforms students into "cultural agents" who possess identity resilience amid the tide of globalization.

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