

Strengthening Cultural Understanding and Local Wisdom through a Cultural Literacy Program at SMA YPK Medan

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Abstract: This community service program focuses on strengthening cultural literacy and local wisdom understanding among students at SMA YPK Medan. The aim was to foster a deeper appreciation of local culture, values, and traditions, integrating them into the educational process to support sustainable cultural preservation. The program involved participatory methods, including workshops, cultural discussions, and creative student projects that showcased the students' interpretations of local heritage. The initiative was designed to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern education, promoting active student engagement and raising awareness of the importance of cultural heritage. The involvement of local community leaders, educators, and the school administration was pivotal in ensuring the success of the program. Results showed increased student enthusiasm towards local culture, as well as a heightened sense of pride and responsibility towards preserving it. The program's potential for sustainability lies in its integration into the school curriculum and its scalability to other educational institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasingly globalized education, the preservation of local culture and the transmission of indigenous knowledge have become critical challenges. Amid rapid technological development and the dominance of global cultural products, younger generations—especially students—are becoming increasingly distanced from their local identities and traditional values. Local wisdom, as part of cultural heritage, is not only an element of identity but also a rich source of ethical values, ecological knowledge, and social practices that are highly relevant for personal development and community sustainability. Embedding cultural literacy in educational settings, particularly vocational schools (SMKs), plays a vital role in shaping students' character and reinforcing their sense of belonging to their cultural roots.

Senior high schools like SMA YPK Medan are designed to prepare students for the labor market with technical and practical skills. However, the emphasis on employability often sidelines the importance of cultural education, leaving students with little exposure to their cultural environment. This disconnect contributes to the erosion of cultural values and the

weakening of students' appreciation for local heritage. Moreover, the school curriculum rarely integrates cultural content or local wisdom into teaching materials, thereby creating a significant gap in holistic education that nurtures both skill and identity.

The cultural literacy program was developed as a response to these challenges. It aims to strengthen students' understanding of local culture and wisdom by designing an engaging and participatory approach to cultural learning. Rather than relying on conventional, didactic instruction, the program involves students in interactive activities such as storytelling, creative projects, and community-based learning. These methods are intended not only to raise awareness but also to cultivate a sense of pride and responsibility in preserving cultural practices.

The primary objective of the program is to increase students' cultural literacy by introducing them to various aspects of their local traditions—language, folklore, rituals, values, and arts—through meaningful interaction with cultural actors and knowledge holders. This approach empowers students to actively explore and document cultural expressions, while also fostering collaboration with local stakeholders such as traditional leaders, artists, and educators.

In doing so, the program serves multiple functions: it acts as a cultural preservation tool, a platform for character education, and a means of community engagement. The outcomes are expected to contribute not only to student development but also to the resilience of local culture in the face of homogenizing global forces. Ultimately, the program aims to serve as a model for integrating cultural literacy into the learning ecosystem of vocational education, supporting Indonesia's broader goal of maintaining cultural diversity while fostering civic and national identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Literacy in Education

Cultural literacy is pivotal in shaping students' identities and character development. It encompasses the knowledge and understanding of one's own culture and the ability to appreciate and engage with diverse cultural expressions. In educational settings, fostering cultural literacy enables students to develop a sense of belonging, respect for diversity, and critical thinking skills. According to Yusuf et al. (2024), integrating local wisdom into character education enhances students' social behavior and environmental awareness, contributing to their holistic development. This approach aligns with the principles of asset-based community development, which emphasizes leveraging community strengths and

resources to foster sustainable growth (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Local Wisdom and Youth Education

Local wisdom, or *kearifan lokal*, refers to the knowledge, practices, and values developed by communities over time, reflecting their adaptation to the environment and social norms. Incorporating local wisdom into education provides students with contextual learning experiences that are relevant to their cultural heritage. Ramdan and Muzakar (2022) highlight that the Sasak community's principles, such as *wirame*, *wirage*, *wirase*, and *wibusane*, serve as foundational values in character education, promoting harmony and ethical conduct. Similarly, Murfiah et al. (2023) demonstrate that integrating local wisdom into social studies curricula strengthens students' resilient character traits, including self-reliance and responsibility, by connecting them with their cultural roots.

Community Engagement Models

Effective community engagement in education involves collaborative efforts between schools, families, and local communities to enhance learning outcomes and foster civic responsibility. Participatory action research (PAR) is a methodology that emphasizes active participation and co-learning among community members and researchers. It enables the identification of local issues and the development of context-specific solutions through collective inquiry and reflection (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). In the context of education, PAR facilitates the integration of community knowledge and values into the curriculum, making learning more relevant and impactful for students.

Another model is service-learning, which combines academic instruction with community service, allowing students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges. This approach not only enhances academic learning but also promotes civic engagement and social responsibility (Jacoby, 2015). By participating in community service projects, students develop empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for personal and societal development.

Furthermore, asset-based community development (ABCD) focuses on identifying and mobilizing community assets, such as local knowledge, skills, and networks, to address challenges and promote positive change. This approach empowers communities to take ownership of their development and fosters sustainable solutions rooted in local contexts (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

In summary, integrating cultural literacy and local wisdom into education through

participatory and community-based models enriches students' learning experiences, strengthens their cultural identity, and prepares them to contribute positively to society. These approaches align with the goals of sustainable development and the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring that education serves as a tool for both personal and communal growth.

3. METHODS

This community service program adopts a **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** approach, combined with **community-based learning** as its core pedagogical framework. PAR is selected due to its collaborative nature, which allows active engagement among researchers, educators, students, and local communities in the co-construction of knowledge. This approach ensures that the program is not only designed *for* the community but developed *with* the community, encouraging mutual learning, empowerment, and sustainable impact. Meanwhile, community-based learning emphasizes experiential learning through direct interaction with cultural agents and community practices, enabling students to gain authentic cultural experiences beyond the classroom.

Location and Target Participants

The program was implemented at **SMA YPK Medan**, that school located in Medan, North Sumatra. This institution was chosen due to its diverse student population and strategic position within a multicultural urban setting where local traditions and modern influences intersect. The primary participants of the program include:

- a. **Students**, particularly those in their second and third year, who are the main beneficiaries of the cultural literacy initiative.
- b. **Teachers**, especially those teaching language, arts, civics, and social sciences, who were involved as facilitators and curriculum integrators.
- c. **Local cultural actors and community leaders**, including traditional artists, storytellers, and elders, who served as knowledge sources and co-educators during community-based sessions.

Program Implementation Steps

The implementation of the cultural literacy program was structured into four main stages:

Preliminary Workshop and Socialization

An initial workshop was held for students, teachers, and local stakeholders to introduce the objectives, structure, and expected outcomes of the program. This session also served to map existing cultural knowledge and perceptions among participants.

Cultural Dialogue and Exploration Sessions

A series of interactive cultural dialogues were conducted, involving discussions on local traditions, language, arts, and values. Local community members shared oral histories, folklore, and lived experiences with students in an informal setting to encourage open and respectful cultural exchange.

Student Creative Projects

Students were grouped and assigned to document or reinterpret a specific cultural practice or story using creative media such as short videos, posters, traditional performances, or digital storytelling. This phase allowed students to internalize the cultural content and express their understanding through contemporary formats.

Reflection and Showcase

At the end of the program, a reflection session was held where students, teachers, and community members shared insights and evaluations. A cultural exhibition and performance day was organized to showcase the students' creative outputs, further strengthening school-community ties.



Figure 1. The facilitator of PKM activity

Data Collection and Analysis

To assess the process and outcomes of the program, a qualitative data collection strategy was employed, comprising:

- a. **Observation** of student participation during workshops and cultural sessions to evaluate engagement and learning behaviors.
- b. **Semi-structured interviews** with selected students, teachers, and community partners to capture individual perceptions, experiences, and feedback.
- c. **Documentation**, including video recordings, student project outputs, and field notes, to archive the process and serve as reference material.

The data were analyzed using **descriptive qualitative analysis**, focusing on identifying recurring themes, participant narratives, and the transformation of attitudes and knowledge related to local culture. This analysis helped in interpreting the impact of the program both in educational and sociocultural terms, providing insights for potential replication and policy integration.

4. RESULTS

Program Activities and Outputs

The implementation of the cultural literacy program at SMA YPK Medan took place over a period of three months, featuring various educational and creative activities aimed at enhancing students' understanding of local culture and wisdom. The program began with a workshop introducing local culture, followed by interactive discussions about the cultural values of North Sumatra, such as Batak customs, regional languages, traditional cuisine, and local art forms like ulos and tortor. The tangible outcomes of this activity included the creation of several cultural literacy products developed directly by the students. These products included educational posters about local customs and traditions, a small book titled "Our Cultural Stories" containing interviews with cultural leaders, and digital presentations delivered by students in a school forum. Some students also performed mini-dramas and musicalized poetry with a local culture theme as part of a cultural showcase.



Figure 2. The Participants of the PKM activity

Student Engagement and Participation

Student participation showed a significant increase throughout the program. Initially, many students showed little interest in cultural topics. However, with the use of participatory and interactive approaches, student enthusiasm grew. This was evident from their involvement in the creative process, their curiosity during discussions with cultural sources, and their willingness to express cultural values through various media.

Students also demonstrated an increased understanding of the importance of preserving culture as a regional identity and national asset. This activity helped foster a sense of pride in local cultural heritage that many students had previously been unaware of.

Community Involvement

The program involved not only students and teachers but also local cultural leaders, parents, and the school principal as part of the learning ecosystem. Cultural leaders were invited as resource persons and mentors, while teachers actively facilitated and accompanied students in developing their literacy projects.

The active involvement of all parties created a collaborative atmosphere during the program and strengthened the integration between formal education and local culture within the school environment.

5. DISCUSSION

Impact on Cultural Awareness

The cultural literacy program at SMA YPK Medan has had a tangible impact on raising cultural awareness among students and the broader school community. Through a participatory approach, students not only learned about culture theoretically but also engaged in hands-on experiences that preserved local values through interaction, exploration, and reflection. Observations showed that students developed a greater appreciation for cultural diversity, a deeper understanding of the significance of local wisdom, and a growing connection between culture and their identity as members of North Sumatran society.

Teachers and educators also benefited from the program. The emergence of collective cultural awareness within the school environment fostered enthusiasm for embedding culture as an integral part of the learning process. Moreover, the program strengthened the relationship between the school and traditional community leaders, promoting a more collaborative educational partnership.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its overall success, the program faced several challenges. One major constraint was limited time due to the school's dense academic schedule. Additionally, not all students initially showed high interest, largely due to their lack of prior experience with culture-based activities.

Logistical issues also arose, particularly in securing resources and scheduling with cultural figures, whose availability was limited. These challenges underscored the importance of flexible planning, effective communication with community partners, and the need for an inclusive and adaptive approach to address students' diverse needs.

Sustainability Potential

This program holds strong potential to be integrated into the school's local content curriculum or extracurricular activities. The enthusiasm from students, along with the support of teachers and the school principal, serves as a foundation for its sustainability. Furthermore, the cultural literacy products developed can serve as ongoing learning resources and inspiration for other schools.

By incorporating the program into the annual educational calendar, cultural literacy initiatives can become a strategic effort to nurture a generation rooted in local cultural values while remaining open to global dynamics.

The cultural literacy program at SMA YPK Medan successfully enhanced students' understanding of local culture and fostered active engagement with the community. The integration of cultural literacy in secondary education is essential for shaping students' identity and preserving local traditions. This program has shown positive impacts, increasing cultural awareness and fostering a sense of pride in cultural heritage. It is recommended that schools and policymakers incorporate cultural literacy into the curriculum as an ongoing initiative. This approach will help ensure the sustainable preservation of cultural values and provide students with a deeper connection to their local heritage.

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